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Negotiating Identities:

Irish Women Religious and Migrations

Yvonne McKenna

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the degree of Ph.D.
Centre for the Study of Women and Gender,
University of Warwick

May 2002

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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge the debt owed to the women who took part in this research; who gave generously of their time and made the collection of oral histories such a hugely interesting, exciting and enjoyable experience. I hope this thesis does some justice to their fascinating stories.

There were many times when writing a PhD seemed an impossible task. The difficulty now is in trying to find a way of adequately thanking the people who made it less so. The Centre for the Study of Women and Gender has been a wonderful place to undertake research and I thank everyone there for providing a welcoming and supportive space on the many trips I made from London. I would particularly like to thank Terry Lovell for her help over the years. I've made good friends in the department and hope they remain so afterwards. For providing room, board and chats that went far into the night, I would especially like to thank Marsha, Joan and Marianna. I feel very lucky to have had Dr. Maria Luddy and Dr. Caroline Wright as my supervisors. Their help along every step of the way, and their willingness to be contacted at any time, has been no small factor in bringing this thesis to fruition. As a parting gift, I know they'll appreciate me taking them off my speed-dial!

Outside the world of academia, I am grateful to the many friends in Dublin, London and Kidderminster (several PLs among them) who tolerated my obsession with this topic, forgave my many social absences and provided encouragement and diversions just when they were needed. From the moment I suggested returning to college, my loving family have been hugely supportive in more ways than I can say. Very special thanks go to Neil, Lorraine and, especially, Mum. Finally, I would like to thank Ewan for offering intellectual and emotional support throughout the whole of this thesis. It was this lot that shared my enthusiasm, made things seem okay when they didn't feel that way and made me laugh when I thought I'd forgotten how to. Thanks so much.

This thesis was part funded by a University of Warwick Doctoral Scholarship and a British Association of Irish Studies bursary. I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender.

Abstract

As the population of Ireland continued to decline in the post-independent period, the number of women entering religious life rose substantially, reaching a peak in the late 1960s. Many of these women lived some or all of their lives outside Ireland. However, despite the recent growth of Irish migration or diaspora studies, very little attention has been given to the role or experience of Irish women religious, who themselves tend not to publish subjective accounts. This is undoubtedly the case with respect to Irish women's migration to England in the twentieth century.

Based on the oral history testimonies of twenty-one Irish women religious, this thesis seeks to explore this under-researched area. It focuses specifically on subjectivity and identity formation; on the ways in which Irish women religious have inhabited, negotiated and contested a sense of self as Irish, as women and as Catholics/religious over the course of their lives and in the context of the societies in which they have lived. Utilising various theories, it looks at the complex ways in which subjectivities are formed and displayed, taking account of the role the women play in constructing a self identity as well as other contributing factors, such as how the women feel they are positioned by others and their socio-historical situation. In allowing the voices of Irish women religious to be heard, this thesis challenges the stereotype of religious as silent, without a voice. By focusing on a group of women thus far disregarded, it contributes to our knowledge not only of women religious but Irish women's migration more generally, providing new insights for this expanding area of research.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The figure of the nun¹ looms large in the popular image of Ireland and Irish womanhood both in Ireland and its diaspora. In a recently published book an England-born author returns to Ireland to rediscover his Irishness; the nun is given pride of place on the cover, alongside the ubiquitous pub and pint of Guinness (McCarthy, 2000). Earlier, Rita Wall had identified nuns as part of the popular stereotype of Irish women in England (1991:10). The image of the nun has also appeared in academic books. A photograph of women religious is included in Barrington's *Irish Women in England* (1997:20) and in Bayor and Meagher's *The New York Irish* (1996:335), suggesting their importance beyond the stereotype as part of the scholarly investigation of the Irish diaspora. In whatever context she is used, however, the Irish nun seems to have more status as an icon than a person: though the image is often seen, the voice is rarely, if ever, heard.

Iconic status confers on religious certain attributes. This is not an empty icon, but one laden with meaning. For example, religious are often associated with repression and denial and are generally positioned as asexual. Lee talks not only of the de-sexualisation but the de-personalisation of nuns (1978:42). The veil and habit are particularly difficult barriers to move beyond. Religious tend not to be seen as persons, much less as women. Patrick O'Sullivan (1995a:42) has argued that photographs are used in books less as a narrative tool in their own right, more often to illustrate a pre-existing narrative that has been created through other sources, such as letters, records and so on. Thus, pictures are used to 'prop up' what has already been said. However, as so little has been written about

the actual life experiences of Irish women religious, the visual image of nuns in academic accounts, loaded as it is with particular meaning, serves only to reinforce stereotypes. The reality of religious' lives remain overlooked.

By making women religious the primary focus of an academic investigation on Irish women's migration to England, this thesis goes some way in shifting the balance from icon to person, enabling the voices of nuns themselves to be heard. In so doing, it contributes in a specific way to our overall knowledge of Irish women's migration and manages also to subvert some of the popular stereotypes about religious, not least the tendency to regard them as an homogeneous group.

THE SCHOLARLY NEGLECT OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

Irish migration to Britain is a vital area of research, given the relationship between the two countries and the scale of and forms such migration has taken, especially over the last two hundred years. Since records first began in 1840, the number of Irish-born people in Britain has never fallen below 400,000 and has been as high as 952,000 (see appendix eight), making them the most numerically important migrant group in Britain over the period (Hickman & Walter, 1997:19). Significantly, and reflecting Irish out-migration patterns generally, women have formed a substantial proportion of the number of Irish people living in Britain. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century they have outnumbered their male counterparts (see appendix eight).

From slow beginnings, the literature on Irish migration to Britain has grown substantially in the last few decades. As it has developed, recurrent debates and themes have become more nuanced, although the tendency is still to explore the reasons behind Irish people's movement to and settlement patterns in Britain. The extent to which Irish people have maintained a distinct identity, the characteristics of this identity, and the degree to which they integrated or assimilated into British society or were discriminated against are other dominant and much debated themes. Within this literature, however, two biases can be identified: much of it has focused on the nineteenth century and it tends to be gender-blind, ignoring the experiences of Irish women.

Since the 1980s, the 'invisibility' of Irish women migrants has begun to be challenged. This reflects the impact of second-wave feminism and the development of women's studies and gender-based analysis within academia. Research on Irish women's experiences of migration has explored traditional concerns as well as opening up new lines of enquiry. While the reasons for movement have continued to be an important theme in this literature, migration as a response to *gendered* structures in Irish society has been more closely examined. In addition to gender, other variables of difference, such as class, have also been identified as significant to the experience of migration. Moreover, Irish national identity in the modern period has closely associated Irish women with the family and positioned them primarily within the 'home' of both family and nation. The implications of this for women living outside Ireland, and the means by which they are able to maintain a sense of Irishness in Britain represents pioneering research and contributes not only to our knowledge of Irish women in Britain but questions the way we think about and use terms such as Irishness and Irish national identity. A cursory glance at

the bibliography at the end of this thesis will confirm that literature pertaining to Irish women's migration has burgeoned in the last five years. However, no serious attention has been paid to the experiences of Irish women religious.

There are several reasons why religious should form a vital part of the study of Irish society and Irish women in Ireland and the diaspora. These include the substantial number of Irish women who lived within religious communities both inside and outside Ireland in the twentieth century, the role religious have played in Irish women's lives and the fact that convents provided a means of training, education, travel and in- or out-migration for women. And yet, religious remain curiously under-explored. While some work has been completed on religious in nineteenth-century Ireland (Clear, 1987b; Magray, 1998) and we know a little about Irish female missionaries in the same period (Hoy & MacCurtain, 1994; Tranter, 1996), significant gaps remain and there has been no academic enquiry of Irish women religious in England either in the twentieth century or before.²

FOCUS OF RESEARCH

This study sets out to explore this neglected area, but in a specific way. The focus is less on the influence of women religious within the diaspora and more on the experiences of these women themselves: women who were born and grew up in Ireland,³ who entered religious life and have lived in England.⁴ The limited research that exists on Irish women religious has tended to come from written sources these women left behind: convent archives, institutional records, letters and so on. By contrast, the approach taken in this thesis is to use the oral history testimonies of Irish women religious as the primary source. Remarking on the general trend to use secondary sources, Margaret MacCurtain has called

for the ‘voices of religious women, the self [as] subject ...to be heard’ (1995:43). This thesis, based on the oral history testimonies of twenty-one Irish nuns, is a response to that call in the specific context of Irish migration to England.

The original aim of the research was to explore the lives of migrant women religious to see if their experiences inhered with or contradicted what has already been said about Irish women in Britain, or, indeed, if it offered new ways of thinking about the subject. The aim was not to deconstruct categories such as gender, religious, ethnic or migrant identities *per se*, but to contribute to our knowledge about Irish women’s lives in England by focusing on a group of women previously ignored and, perhaps, raise questions about who it is we assume to be referring to when we talk about such women.

Organised around identity, this thesis seeks to explore how women religious articulate a sense of self. It is concerned with the methods by which they do this, the context in which it is done and the negotiations that occur around it. My respondents provide a means of investigating the disadvantaged position of women in Ireland during a particular period (1910s-1960s) and the decisions some women made in response. It explores the experiences of migration and the subjectivities the women have claimed or inhabited since. In so doing, it aims to say something not only about women religious, Irish migration, or even Irish women’s migration, but Irish women more generally, as well as observing the complex ways in which identities are formed and displayed. Identity is of prime importance because asking women about identity provides a unique insight into how they interpret, experience and respond to their social circumstances, which are generally hidden from the historical record.

KEY THEMES

Certain themes have emerged from this research and driven its analysis. As stated above, the central platform around which this thesis is constructed is identity, and more precisely interconnecting forms of identity, including gendered, religious, ethnic and migrant identities. With respect to gender, the forms of womanhood available to, inhabited by or rejected by the women enables an exploration of how the women both perceive and negotiate a position for themselves within religious life and within the wider society. Religious identity is used to explore the ways in which the women are defined by religious life and define themselves in relation to it. Analysing ethnicity and migrancy in relation to gender and religious life provides a new angle for exploring notions of Irishness.

Because identities are neither formed nor lived in a vacuum, this thesis seeks to explore the theme of identity from a wider perspective, looking at how the women construct themselves and feel constructed by others as women, as nuns and as Irish, as well as in relation to class and geography. This particular theoretical approach highlights fundamental inter-dynamics within identity that are often lost in scholarly focuses of individual variables (for example, ethnicity) which tend to subsume other aspects of identity.

Given that stories of migration precede the date of departure, and because identity is constructed over time in relation to previous experiences as well as present circumstances, the women's lives prior to leaving Ireland form an important part of the enquiry. The

time-frame of the research, determined by the age of the respondents, spans several decades, from the 1910s to the 1990s. This broad time-frame is both a feature of the research and a theme within it because we construct ourselves and are constructed by others in the moment, over time and retrospectively. Related to this point, one aim is to develop or highlight the connections between identity formation and context whether social, political, economic or geographic.

Another important point of reference to emerge (which was also an important point of identity construction and deconstruction), and one that has affected the structure of the thesis throughout, is Vatican II – the name given to the second meeting of the Catholic Church’s Vatican Council which took place between 1962 and 1965. The aim of Vatican II was to modernise the Catholic Church and, over time, it has had a profound effect on the organisation of religious life and the lives of the women within it.⁵ Yet it has been a neglected subject even in studies of women religious. In this study, the significance of Vatican II from the point of view of the women is highlighted and explored, not only in terms of its relatively immediate repercussions but also the effect it continues to have. Of particular concern is the impact of Vatican II on the women’s ability to make new claims on womanhood, and the varied ways in which they have been able to formulate, practise and understand their religious identity and subjectivity as nuns in its wake. In addition, looking at Vatican II in relation to ethnicity reveals interesting connections between how the women define and experience their ethnicity and the particular organisation of their religious congregation. An exploration of the material implications of Vatican II on the organisation of religious life, and the way this affected the women on a personal level, provides a means by which to explore issues of agency and control.

CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

The central value of this research lies in its empirical originality. Until now, very little has been known about the experiences of Irish women religious in England. As a neglected area of academic research, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the literature. There are no studies based on oral history that explore the reasons why Irish women entered religious life and next to nothing is known about this form of migration. Other new areas are also explored: the time scale of the research spans several decades, incorporating the women's experiences prior to migration as well as their experiences since then, and up to the contemporary period. In addition, this thesis gives more serious consideration to forms of identity other than ethnicity and Irishness than has been the case in studies of Irish migration thus far. For example, it takes account of gendered and religious identity, not only in relation to nationality and ethnicity but in terms of how they relate to each other and other modes of identity.

While making a contribution to the literature on Irish women's migration, this research also seeks to contribute to Irish migration or diaspora studies more generally, as well as to the history of Irish women and Irish society. It does so by offering an insight into a particular group of women thus far disregarded. Moreover, in suggesting why women religious have been disregarded, it also informs the way other groups have been presented. As an interview-based study of women, it adds to the canon of oral history and women's studies by contributing to our knowledge about the experiences of women generally and, in particular, a group of women especially hidden in the historical record.

STRUCTURE

In this section of the introduction, the chapters which follow are outlined to indicate the structure of the thesis. In the first section of chapter two, three sets of literature are critically reviewed: general literature on Irish migration to Britain; that which pertains to Irish women specifically; and literature on Irish women religious in Ireland. In addition to highlighting gaps to be found in this material, the ways in which each of these sets of literature have influenced this research are outlined. The questions that have guided this research are also posed to give the reader a clearer sense of its objectives. In order to explore the ways in which identity was constructed within the collected oral history narratives, a theoretical framework was developed. This was drawn especially but not exclusively from previous works which have focused on gender identity formation; notions of diaspora and 'diaspora space'; and Pierre Bourdieu's metaphors of capital. This framework is elaborated in the second part of chapter two.

Chapter three offers a frank description and critical discussion of my experiences collecting oral history through an engagement with current debates within feminist methodologies, as well as outlining the process of analysis that followed. Particular themes explored in this chapter include the significance of power as a dynamic within the interviewer-interviewee relationship and the practical and intellectual issues associated with turning narratives into a thesis. The main purpose of the chapter is to establish and illustrate the processes by which this thesis came to be produced.

Chapter four provides the reader with background information in which to place the women's accounts. One of the aims of this research is to highlight the connection between the ways the women construct their identities and the context in which they live their lives, without suggesting a determining relationship between the two. Especial consideration is given in this chapter to the following: Irish society during the period the women were born and grew up, the impact of Vatican II, Irish migration to Britain and the position occupied by Irish people in Britain in the twentieth century.

Four analytical chapters follow, based primarily on the women's narratives. Each one focuses on a particular form of identity: gendered, religious, ethnic and migrant. Although, obviously, identities are lived simultaneously, the strategy adopted in the first three of these chapters is to explore specific forms of identity in turn. This enabled sufficient space to be given to the particular types of identity that comprise the main focus of this research and, in addition, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the changes and negotiations in identity that have taken place over time. Disaggregating identities, even momentarily, facilitated a greater focus on identities other than ethnicity – more so, I feel, than has been the case in studies on Irish women's migration to date.

Chapter five explores gendered identity by focusing on three periods of the women's lives: growing up, religious life in the pre-Vatican II period, and life since Vatican II. It examines how the women inhabited girlhood and womanhood, the implications of entering religious life upon their sense of themselves as women, and the negotiations around this that have taken place since Vatican II. It seeks not only to explore but also to emphasise the importance of particular and changing notions of womanhood and codes of

female behaviour. These have influenced and impinged upon the women, as well as been resisted and reproduced, over the course of their lives.

Concentrating on the same three periods, chapter six moves on to look at religious identity, although gender remains a fundamental component. It examines how the women experienced and were formed by Catholicism in their youth and how their practice of religion was altered first by entry into religious life and later by Vatican II. Few scholarly works have paid attention to the personal experiences of women religious, while none has focused upon Irish women religious. This chapter opens up this under-researched area, exploring the 'natural' versus 'constructed' basis of Catholicism before and after entry into religious life, and delineates Vatican II as a key process in the women's lives and an important prism through which to understand their accounts.

Although the primary focus of chapter seven is ethnicity, by examining its enduring significance for the women within religious life both before and after Vatican II, it links itself to the previous two chapters. Giving less space to the growing up period, it introduces migration as a major theme and asks whether and how religious life altered attitudes to and experiences of migration for the women. This is examined both in the context of religious community and, especially in the post-Vatican II period, outside it. Of particular concern is the women's on-going relationship with Ireland and Irishness and the way they articulate a sense of themselves as Irish women religious in England or elsewhere. Their status as religious provides a different, unique and original angle from which to explore these issues.

The penultimate chapter considers migrant identities with respect to ethnicity, religion and gender. It explores what the narratives reveal about the women's sense of 'home' and 'belonging' in relation to the particular forms of identity looked at in the preceding three chapters. The aim of the chapter is to bring together the main identities that form the basis of this thesis, previously examined in separate chapters, to explore the interconnections and inter-dynamics between them and to use this synthesis to raise questions about the way migrant Irish women have traditionally been looked at. The concluding chapter brings together the main ideas of all the preceding chapters and puts them in the context of the existing literature examined in chapter two.

A NOTE ON TERMS

Within different disciplines, there is some debate over the use of the terms emigration, migration and diaspora when referring to Ireland and the movement of Irish people beyond the island of Ireland. Lloyd, from a literary background, identifies emigration as the most appropriate term because, he suggests, it evokes memories of 'famine, of eviction, of dispossession and of economic depression' and thus serves as 'a reminder of the political and economic legacies of colonialism' (1994:4). This reveals his own particular interpretation and historical contextualisation of Irish migration and it is one he is not alone in having. Certainly in Ireland discourses of emigration have chiefly negative connotations and the term has been used to suggest reluctant and enforced exile from the homeland in the post-Famine period, especially that of men (for example, Miller, 1985).

O'Sullivan (also from a literary background) also rejects emigration as too 'emotionally-freighted' a term, given that it has a particular narrative in the Irish context (1995b:2). In addition, he suggests it may be misleading since emigration refers specifically to movement across nation or state boundaries and those between Ireland and Britain have not only changed over time but remain both contested and porous (1995b:3). Instead, he suggests migration⁶ as a more appropriate and inclusive term, one that can incorporate both in- and out-migration. Likewise, historian David Fitzpatrick tends now to use the term migration over emigration (1994). For him, migration seems a more inclusive term, one capable of encompassing the complexities of movement and the continued possibilities of further movement or return (1994:534).

Like O'Sullivan and Fitzgerald, I regard migration as a more appropriate and encompassing term. While I acknowledge emigration as a political term, I choose to use the term migration in preference in this research, although for different reasons. First, the emigration narrative is a gendered one, tending to characterise the women who left Ireland as more weak-willed and selfishly opportunistic than their male counterparts (Gray, 1996a; Lee, 1989) and this, I would want to contest. Second, and more importantly, I use migration because the women interviewed for this research rarely defined themselves as emigrants, the reasons for which will be explored in a later chapter.⁷ In the chapters that follow, the term emigration is used only to refer to particular discursive constructions of Irish out-migration and, as such, appears in inverted commas.

Lloyd's argument favouring the term emigration is framed against the adoption of the term diaspora, which he feels sanitises the history of Irish migration by emphasising positive

cultural attributes of Irishness over the harsh political and historical fact of enforced migration. The particular ways in which diaspora has been employed as a concept in explorations of migration, especially Irish migration, and the influence of these explorations on this study are explored in greater detail in chapters two and eight. In this chapter, meanwhile, the term diaspora has been used in a general sense to refer to the dispersal of Irish people and their descendants outside the island of Ireland but one which continues to recognise the importance (albeit to varying degrees) of Ireland and Irishness; and the sub-genre of Irish studies that has developed around migration.

This introductory chapter ‘sets the scene’ for those that follow. In it, I have tried to give a brief indication of what will be defined, explored and considered in more detail in the succeeding chapters. One of the main purposes of this chapter has been to emphasise the originality of this research, highlighting its focus on a group of women thus far neglected in scholarly studies. While providing an important first step, this research can only represent the beginning. The following chapters are but one interpretation, the first of many stories to be collected and told about a group of women integral to but overlooked in the recent growth of studies on Irish women’s history, Irish diaspora studies and Irish women’s migration.

¹ The terms ‘nun’ and ‘sister’ have distinct meanings in canon law (the law of the Catholic Church). Strictly speaking, ‘nuns’ are members of religious orders, take formal vows and are enclosed while ‘sisters’ are members of religious congregations who take simple vows and are not enclosed, thus allowing them to work and move outside their congregation. The distinction is rarely maintained in the vernacular, however. For stylistic reasons, ‘religious’, ‘sister’ and ‘nun’ are used interchangeably throughout this thesis, although the focus of the research is on ‘active’ religious.

² Although also under-researched, the role of the priest has been given more attention. See, for example, Fielding (1993).

³ In this case, I use ‘Ireland’ to refer to the whole island of Ireland: what is now a twenty-six county Republic and the six counties that form Northern Ireland, which remains part of the United Kingdom. Two of the women interviewed for this thesis were born in Northern Ireland, one before Southern Ireland (as the twenty-six counties are often referred to) became independent, the other after the Northern Irish state had

been created. Two of the women also went to England to be educated in their teens and, as a result, did some of their growing up there, but returned to spend holidays in Ireland.

⁴ By design, all the women interviewed for this thesis were 'active' religious. The focus of this thesis is Irish women's migration to England more than Britain. Although some of the women lived in Scotland/Wales, their experience of this is not explored in any great detail. England' and 'Englishness' are more specific terms than 'Britain' and 'Britishness'. Throughout this thesis, I use both terms but try to make clear why I use one term over another. The women themselves often used the term 'Britain' to talk about their experiences in England, and I have left this stand in their quotes. When I talk about state relations, I use the term 'Britain' rather than England. However, when referring to post-colonial Irish identity and attitudes towards the former colonial power, I use the term England because it was England that was seen as the traditional 'enemy' more than Scotland/Wales or Britain. In the literature review, the broader term 'Britain' is used because some of the literature pertains more generally to Britain than England.

⁵ Vatican II will be defined and explored in greater detail in the chapters to follow.

⁶ More generally and increasingly in the context of (fortress) Europe, the definition of migration/migrant is also contested, especially with respect to legality and the control and regulation of migration (Kofman *et al* 2000:11-13).

⁷ When asked if they regarded themselves as 'Irish emigrants in England', the interesting and almost universal response was in the negative. The reasons for this will be explored in chapter 7.

Chapter 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

In an otherwise positive review of Bayor and Meagher's *The New York Irish* (1996), Patrick O'Sullivan drew attention to an omission: the authors had neglected to explore the importance of religious orders in maintaining a Catholic Irish identity or in themselves offering a migration route or career structure for Irish women (O'Sullivan, 1998:83). In fact, this statement could be more generally applied. Despite the growth in recent years of Irish migration studies very little attention has been given to the role, influence or experience of Irish women religious. This is undoubtedly the case in studies of Irish migration to Britain. In the first section of this chapter, three sets of literature are reviewed to suggest first, that studies of Irish migration to Britain have tended to be gender biased, almost ignoring the experiences of women; second, that material which focuses on women enables us to think, research and write about Irish migration in new ways; and third, that studies of Irish women religious have almost entirely ignored migration to Britain. Following this, and highlighting the particular ways in which these sets of literature have shaped the approach taken in this thesis, the questions that have guided this research are outlined.

In the second part of the chapter, the conceptual framework developed to analyse oral history accounts from Irish women religious is explored. The framework is developed from various sources, few of which have focused on Irish women religious or migration; it has been appropriated from studies of subjectivity and identity formation. The strategy for

exploring gendered identity formation is influenced by the works of Dorinne Kondo, Beverly Skeggs and others, while Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'capital', theories of diaspora and Avtar Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' were employed to explore how the women of this study positioned themselves, and felt positioned by others, in their accounts as Irish, women and religious.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Irish Migration to Britain: Gender Bias

Despite the scale of Irish migration to Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,¹ it was not until 1963 that the first scholarly work appeared devoted to the subject: J. A. Jackson's *The Irish in Britain*.² Drawing on census material, parliamentary papers, government reports and other secondary sources, Jackson's aim was to examine the roots of nineteenth-century Irish migration in order to gain a better understanding of the contemporary position of Irish people in Britain. He was especially concerned to explore the scale of Irish migration to Britain, its causes (which he found to be chiefly economic), patterns of settlement and occupation in Britain, reception by the host society and levels of integration.

Jackson suggested that despite their marginalisation in the nineteenth century, the Irish in Britain had, by the time he was writing, successfully integrated into British society, although not at the expense of their Irishness. Highlighting the importance of the Catholic Church in this regard, Jackson argued that the Irish were still a 'distinctive population' (1963:158) in British society, whose separate identity was maintained both by the Irish

themselves, and imposed upon them by their host community. Although he judged the Irish to have ‘succeeded’ or survived in Britain, Jackson emphasised the difficulty of migration and the problems of identity associated with it. He described Irish migrants as:

[B]elong[ing] to two communities both real, each with ties upon them imposing a conflict of interests and obligations which cannot easily be resolved. They are marginal *men*, and are liable to remain so until they die (1963:158-9, my emphasis).

Jackson made some reference to women but did not explore their position in any great detail and it was clear he was writing for the most part about ‘Irishmen’, the generic term he used throughout the book (Walter, 2001:2).

In the wake of Jackson, though not initially at any great speed, several historical studies have appeared, concentrating principally on the nineteenth century. Dominant themes include the causes and consequences of Irish migration; the perception of Irish migration by British society; the ways in which it has changed; and the extent to which Irish migrants have integrated into British society or preserved a distinct identity of their own: culturally, religiously, economically, socially or politically.

Initially, the tendency was to focus on areas with a high concentration of Irish migrants (Lees, 1979; Lowe, 1989; Swift & Gilley, 1985), to explore the disadvantaged and marginalised position of poor, Catholic communities and the means by which these communities maintained and developed an Irish identity in their new urban environment. A distinct Irish identity held strong, it was argued, until the end of the nineteenth century when Irish people began to assimilate more into British society.

Later works challenged the notion of one homogenous Irish migrant experience which suggested all Irish migrants were poor, Catholic, nationalists, exiled in urban ghettos (Davis, 1991; Swift & Gilley, 1989; MacRaild, 1998, 1999, 2000). In focusing on regions or groups not previously explored (for instance, non-urban areas or the experiences of middle-class migrants) these works emphasised the diversity of Irish migration to Britain, although the notion of increased assimilation over time was not challenged. Another theme that has received more attention in later studies is the relationship between Catholicism and identity. Questioning the theory that a separate Irish identity began to dissolve in the later part of the nineteenth century, Fielding (1993) suggested that Catholicism gave Irish people in Britain a distinct ethnic identity that lasted beyond World War II. However, Hickman (1995) has argued that Catholic-sponsored education in Britain in the nineteenth century was designed to cultivate incorporation and assimilation of Irish pupils through processes of de-nationalisation. Identity as a theme has continued to dominate the historical literature although the debates around what it means to be Irish, what constitutes a distinct Irish identity, its endurance into the twentieth century and the extent to which it might be considered an ethnic identity have become more theoretical and complex.

Despite this burgeoning literature on nineteenth-century Irish migration to Britain, and with the exception of two chapters in MacRaild's (2000) edited collection, only Lees (1979) focused in any way on women. By giving the family due regard, Lees was able to highlight the economic contribution made by migrant Irish women to the family economy. Although she came to no conclusions about the effect of migration on women's position in the home, Lees at least identified the family, and the position of women within it, as an

important factor in the experience of migration and in maintaining or developing a post-migrant Irish identity. However, because she focused on the 'Irish' family, Lee did not explore either single women or those married to non-Irish men.

Although some more historical studies on Irish women's migration are beginning to appear, there has been a gender blindness, if not male bias, in most general accounts. This is reflected in Swift and Gilley's (1999) most recent collection on Irish migration to Britain: none of the contributions focuses on women. Given that the editors described the collection as a reflection of 'the "state of the art" in the late 1990s of the study of the Irish in Britain' (1999:13), it seems a prescient reminder of the disregard of women and their experiences in general accounts.

While historical studies form the bulk of full-length studies on Irish migration to Britain at least, contributions have also come from other fields, including outside academia. Many contemporary analyses of the position occupied by Irish people in Britain has come from sociology or sociological-based research, for the most part in short papers, articles or chapters in edited collections (Chance, 1987; King *et al*, 1989; Taylor, 1988; Walter, 1980, 1984). Based on quantitative research methods, much of this literature has drawn attention to the distinctive and primarily disadvantaged position of Irish people in Britain in the twentieth century (Bagley & Binitie, 1970; Bennett, 1988; Burke, 1976; Lloyd, 1995; Pearson *et al*, 1991). In categorising 'the Irish' as a distinct ethnic minority in the twentieth century (one not recognised officially),³ some of this literature challenges the assumptions about integration, if not assimilation, made in the historical literature (Hickman 1996; Kells, 1995a). Hazelkorn (1991) offers a more nuanced account,

however, suggesting that class has been the defining factor affecting the contemporary position of Irish people in Britain and their ability to integrate successfully. However, as had been the case with the historical material, general accounts tended to focus on Irish men.

Outside academia, published reports and community-based projects have also contributed to our knowledge about the Irish in Britain. In response to anti-Irish hostility intensified by the IRA campaign in Britain which began in the 1970s, Irish migrant communities began to be more assertive in displaying an Irish identity and some published accounts of their experiences which drew attention to their marginalisation, but also celebrated their Irishness (Curtis *et al*, 1987; Lynch, 1988; O'Grady, 1988). While some women's voices began to be heard or represented in these accounts, they did so as members of Irish communities and were confined in the main to heterosexual, Catholic and married women.

Perhaps related to this greater assertiveness, if not an attempt to embrace some notion of 'multiculturalism', certain councils in London, including the Greater London Council, began to recognise Irish people as a distinct minority and invested resources into exploring their disadvantaged position.⁴ In a similar vein, Curtis (1984) explored the historical roots of anti-Irish racism and its continued relevance for Irish people living in Britain. Literature such as this, however, tended to 'fix' the Irish in Britain as a disadvantaged minority only (Gray, 2000a:74-5; Kofman *et al*, 2000:169).

In the mid-1990s and in response to claims of anti-Irish racism made to the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the CRE commissioned a report to explore discrimination and

the Irish community in Britain (Hickman & Walter, 1997). Based on reports published by agencies working with Irish communities, consultation with workers in those agencies and interviews with eighty-eight Irish migrants, the report found that anti-Irish racism was endemic to British society and ingrained in certain state-structures such as policing and the criminal justice system (1997:235, 190). It further found that anti-Irish racism was generally accepted as natural or justified in British society (1997:213). The report recommended that the Irish community be given official ethnic minority status so that proper monitoring of their situation might be undertaken.

While non-academic literature celebrated Irish culture and the contribution Irish people made to British society, especially more recently (see, for example, Holohan, 1995), for the most part, it drew attention to disadvantage and discrimination suffered by Irish people in Britain. Moreover, in examining 'the Irish community' as a whole, few attempts were made to explore the specificity of gender in the experience of migration and many relied on the statistical evidence of Irish men only (for some notable exceptions, see Barrington, 1997).

During the 1990s (1992-7), and reflecting growing interest in the subject area, Patrick O'Sullivan published his Irish World Wide Series, a five-volume collection focusing on Irish migration which helped to establish the academic genre (or sub-genre) of Irish migration studies. O'Sullivan's aim was to focus beyond 'oppression history' and incorporate a more interdisciplinary approach (1992:xviii-xx). Although several of the contributions focused on Irish migration to Britain, predominantly this was on the nineteenth century. Reflecting the development of women's studies and gender studies

within academia, one volume of the collection was devoted to Irish women's migration.⁵ Although clearly a positive step forward, O'Sullivan's stated commitment to gender was not realised throughout the series as a whole.⁶

While Jackson's 1963 study had fitted into no established genre on the subject, the next full-length study on twentieth century Irish migration to Britain, which appeared thirty-seven years after Jackson's, Delaney's *Demography, State and Society, Irish Migration to Britain, 1921-1971* (2000), found an easy home within Irish migration studies. Through his Irish World Wide series, O'Sullivan had wanted to illustrate the development of an interdisciplinary genre, one in which the different disciplines were beginning to listen and learn from one another. It might have been expected that Delaney's offering, which was from an historical perspective, would reflect this interdisciplinarity, including giving due regard to the experiences of women.

Primarily concerned to explore contributing factors and patterns of migration as well as British and Irish state attitudes towards Irish migration, Delaney's 'secondary themes' included gender, religion and migrant experiences (2000:1). Thoroughly well researched, utilising previously under- and un-used sources, Delaney's book marks a significant contribution to the field. This is especially so on the subject of government attitudes and policies (not always the same thing). Like Jackson, Delaney argues that the main cause of migration was economic: the underdeveloped economy of the Irish state combined with better opportunities in Britain. He highlights the importance of family and kin in motivating and facilitating migration by sending money, stories and expectations back to Ireland. Certainly one of the richest aspects of Delaney's research is what it reveals about

the role of the Catholic Church. The faith and fate of Irish migrants, especially women, was of great concern to the Catholic Church in Ireland and its counterpart in Britain. Delaney shows, however, that the Church's work in helping Irish migrants effectively absolved the Irish government of responsibility (2000:203).⁷

Despite his stated aim, Delaney's commitment to gender was not fully realised. Although he notes female migration, settlement and work patterns, he seems more concerned to explore sex differentials than use gender as an analytical tool. The only point he explores in any great detail is the suggestion made by some previous writers (including Travers, 1995) that women left Ireland for reasons other than economics, which he ultimately dismisses. If there were other factors, Delaney argues, they could still be reduced to economics – specifically, women's low economic status in Ireland (2000:184). What he does not explore is the possibility that low economic status was itself a reflection of the generally low status of women in Ireland and that this could have contributed to their desire/need to leave Ireland not necessarily in pursuit of economic advancement. For example, Kennedy had linked the low status of women in Ireland to their disproportionately high mortality rate, suggesting that women left not merely to improve their situation but to survive (1973:70). Moreover, though not a fault of Delaney's, many of the sources he uses are themselves gender blind and this means that the attention to women/gender overall is affected. Although he does draw on oral histories of Irish women collected by others, this is more to flesh out a point that is being made than to explore new areas of research or provide new insights (see for example, 2000:160).

In this section, I have briefly examined what has been written about Irish migration to Britain, from Jackson's ground-breaking work in 1963 to Delaney's more recent offering.⁸ The intention has been to illustrate the way in which our knowledge of the subject has been shaped by the different approaches taken (for example, historical, sociological and non-academic), and recurring thematic emphasis, including economic motivations for migration and post-migration identity formation and development. The tendency, at least in full-length studies, to focus on nineteenth-century migration has also been noted, reflecting the fact that most of the literature comes from a particular historical perspective.

In particular, this section has highlighted the lack of attention given to women's experiences of migration in these general studies, which is at best inappropriate given the scale of Irish women's migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁹ and the fact that it had been noted at least as early as 1973 (Kennedy, 1973:66-85). This is not to say that we know nothing of Irish women's experiences or that the literature reviewed in this section give us no information about women. However, women's experiences have tended to be lost in 'general' approaches.¹⁰ Much of what we know about women's experiences comes from studies that focus specifically on women. While this material has influenced to some degree the direction of Irish migration studies, Delaney's failure to fulfil his commitment to gender shows how under-analysed, if no longer fully ignored, the experiences of women remain.

Irish Women's Migration to Britain: Questions of Identity and Exclusion

The lacunae in our knowledge of Irish women's migration to Britain has been much noted (O'Sullivan, 1995; Rossiter, 1993; Swift & Gilley, 1985, 1989), although it is a growing area of enquiry, especially since the early 1990s.¹¹ In this section, I examine what has been written on the subject in order to identify major themes within it and suggest the direction this literature seems to be taking at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Towards the end of the section, more detailed attention will be paid to three significant contributors to the field.

In contrast to the general material reviewed above, an historical perspective has not dominated the literature on Irish women's migration. Historical explorations do exist (Kanya-Forstner, 2000; Letford & Pooley, 1995; Pooley, 2000; Rossiter 1993, 1996) which reflect the growth of women's history as a genre. Even within these accounts, however, there has not been the same emphasis on nineteenth-century migration. Historical studies have tended to focus on traditional themes such as settlement and occupation patterns and the role of religion in maintaining an Irish identity. Twentieth-century historical accounts cover similar ground although they have explored, in addition, the gendered causes of migration, such as women's economic and socially disadvantaged position in Irish society (Lambert, 2000;¹² Marks, 1990, 1992; Rossiter, 1993; Travers, 1995). By drawing attention to the scale of women's migration, these studies challenge the misconceived stereotype of Irish out-migration as a particularly male pursuit.

Other fields have proved more prolific than the academic discipline of history in contributing to our knowledge about Irish women's migration. Significant in this regard has been non-academic, feminist influenced (if not inspired) attempts by Irish women living in Britain to let their voices be heard and their own experiences represented (Kestelman, 1995). Published material from the London Irish Women's Centre (LIWC) between 1984 and 1996, which includes organisational and conference reports, not only records the socio-economic position of Irish women in London but gives some indication of the issues concerning its members, such as assimilation, discrimination, motherhood and sexuality within British society.

Lennon (1980, 1982, 1988), in articles for feminist publications and in a co-authored book, has used women's narrative accounts to explore the experiences of migration to Britain for Irish women. Indeed, *Across the Water* (1988), was the first book published entirely devoted to the subject. Concerned to document this 'wholly unremarked phenomenon' (1988:9) Lennon *et al* interviewed over eighty Irish women living in Britain about their (gendered) reasons for leaving Ireland and experiences of arriving and living in Britain.

Particular issues highlighted included the specific ways in which Irish women faced and dealt with discrimination in British society as women, workers, wives and mothers. Other major themes included the family, Catholicism, sexuality and, most especially, the myth of assimilation. Although generally regarded as having assimilated easily (on account of being predominantly white and English speaking), and more easily than Irish men because of their greater connection with the host society through work and motherhood, the

women's accounts revealed a strong Irish identity and uneasy sense of belonging in Britain.

While *Across the Water* represented a significant contribution to the literature on Irish women's migration it was limited by a lack of contextualisation or analysis. Reflecting the times in which it was written, when feminists privileged women's voices/experiences as 'pure' knowledge or truth (Smith, 1987), the authors wanted to let the women speak for themselves, 'in their own words' (1988:11). The accounts, however, were clearly guided by themes set by the authors. Moreover, almost all of the book's contributors were working-class, heterosexual women, predominantly from 'the Irish community', many with some connection to the Catholic Church and often sympathetic to Irish nationalist politics. This suggested a consensus amongst Irish women and their experiences in Britain, issues not explored by the authors.

Wall's *Leading Lives* (1991) intended to do something quite different. Through interviews with high-profile Irish women living in Britain, Wall's aim was to challenge the stereotype of Irish women in Britain as 'mystical' Mother Ireland, down-trodden Catholic mothers or 'eccentric' nuns (1991:9-10). This book, highlighting the contribution Irish women made to British society, took a celebratory approach and reflected the growing confidence in Irishness, both in Ireland and amongst Irish communities in Britain.

Although social-policy documents and council reports on Irish communities tended initially to be male biased, over time greater attention began to be paid to women,

especially in the 1990s. Areas of exploration included Irish women's access to housing (Egan & Tilki, 1995), their experience of maternity (Carr, 1996) and issues of mental and sexual health (LIWC, 1999; Maynes, 1995, 1996; O'Brien, 1993). These studies emphasised Irish women's disadvantaged position. Similarly, writing for the London Strategic Policy Unit and Ealing Council, Walter (1988, 1989a) recorded the geographical distribution and demographic character of Irish women in London to highlight their economic contribution to the economy and disadvantaged socio-economic position. Walter drew attention to the distinctive position of Irish women with respect to both the indigenous female population and Irish men in London. Based on oral history accounts of Irish nurses living in London, she suggested that Irish women were 'pushed out of Ireland' by the lack of opportunities available to them there, but faced discrimination and racism in Britain (1989a:76) where they were 'doubly invisible' as female members of an ethnic minority.¹³ Notable within this literature is the greater tendency to use women's oral accounts, a methodology associated with feminism and its commitment to letting women's voices be heard.

More attention to the contemporary position of Irish women migrants in Britain also began to be shown within academia.¹⁴ Moreover, the common methodology used to explore the subject (oral history) suggested a blurring of disciplinary boundaries – sociology and sociological-based studies were clearly being influenced by women's studies and feminism. Contributions to O'Sullivan's (1995) *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, included Kelly & NicGiolla Choille's account of their experiences working for a migrant advice agency in Ireland, in which they suggested that women were leaving Ireland in the 1980s in response to several factors, including domestic violence and abuse (1995:168-

191). Based on the oral history accounts of four women, Kells' (1995a) focused on gender and ethnic identity amongst third-wave¹⁵ middle-class migrants to London, from an anthropological perspective. While she noted great diversity in the way the women related their Irishness to her, and found that this was affected by different religious, political and regional backgrounds, Kells' failed to explore the interconnections between gender and ethnicity.¹⁶ Although very different in emphasis, these two chapters followed a similar approach: utilising the accounts of women to examine areas previously ignored.

Irish Studies student Mary Daniels (1993) and geographers King & O'Connor (1996) used a similar qualitative approach, oral history, and focus, on identity, in their research. Daniels showed that the middle-class Irish midwives she spoke to maintained a strong Irish identity through family connections, visits 'home' to Ireland, Irish current affairs and most especially, involvement in the Catholic Church, but that they also felt a sense of belonging in Britain (1993:7). In contrast to Walter's research, Daniels found that her respondents were much less exposed to anti-Irish hostility, reflecting what she believed was regional and class specificity (1993:6).

King & O'Connor, whose respondents were from, and remained in, a lower economic class than Daniels', were concerned to explore several aspects of the women's lives, including gendered causes of migration, employment patterns in Britain and the extent to which their respondents held on to an Irish identity (1996:313). Like Walter, they found that the women they spoke to left Ireland in response to the insufficient opportunities available to them as women (1996:323). As Daniels had, they found that the women preserved a strong Irish identity in Britain. This was done through marrying Irish men,

retaining their Catholic faith and maintaining strong links with Ireland (1996:323). What both these articles highlighted was the importance of Catholicism to Irish identity, especially amongst migrants of the second-wave. In a work-in-progress, Buckley (1997), showed how women's experiences might be used to critically deconstruct the position of Irish women in Britain and Ireland and planned to bring her theories to bear on interviews with women.

Two writers whose contribution to the field has been substantial, represent, through different departmental affiliation, its interdisciplinarity. Since 1996, sociologist Gray has published numerous articles many of which focus on Irish women's migration to Britain (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Her approach is qualitative and transnational, based on interviews with women from the Republic of Ireland, some of whom migrated to Britain in the 1980s, others who 'stayed put' in Ireland. The context of her research is the historical relationship between Britain and Ireland and Ireland's emergent position as an economically successful European country, experiencing *immigration* of Irish and other nationals, with a multifarious global cultural identity (1997b).¹⁷ Primarily, Gray's focus is national identity and the ways in which, by creating a unifying group category, women's voices are silenced in discourses of Irishness.

Speaking to her respondents about 'womanhood', being Irish and the experience (or not) of migration, Gray explores the ways in which women articulate a sense of Irish national identity and the influence of gender and migration upon this. While recognising the allure of national identity as a 'mode of belonging' (1998:146), Gray explores how gender and

migration, which she believes to be constitutive parts of Irishness (1996), might be used to expose the limitations in discourses of national identity and provide new ways of thinking and theorising about it.

Gray charts the shift in Ireland from territorially-bounded notions of Irishness (which necessarily excluded migrants), to more recent appropriations of diasporic identity in the 1990s, propagated and popularised especially by Mary Robinson during her term as President. She shows that current formulations of diasporic identity still fail to transcend the national, continue to establish boundaries between ‘us at home’ and ‘them abroad’, and do not speak to the concerns and experiences of women living in the diaspora (2000b:172-3).¹⁸ In addition, Gray found that the limited ways of talking about Irish migration – as ‘unnatural’, justified only in the pursuit of economic success – were also *gendered* discourses, constructing women as ‘properly’ belonging only ‘at home’ (both near the family and within the nation) (1997b).

Exploring gender, Gray found that the women she spoke to had limited ways of talking about their own Irish womanhood (1997a). Authentic Irish womanhood was still felt to reside in the figure of the (heterosexual) ‘strong Irish Mother’ produced by Catholic, nationalist state discourses (1997a:123), although this was a model the women were seeking distance from. While the women continued to make reference to Catholicism and Ireland in trying to locate themselves as women, they did this in a more modern, liberal, internationalist way which, while not ‘authenticated’, represented for Gray possibilities for creating new ways of articulating Irish womanhood.

Gray argues that, although silenced in established or dominant discourses of national identity, migration and, even, womanhood, the women's accounts illustrate the heightened sense of Irishness that many Irish women living outside Ireland experience, as well as their on-going negotiation of gendered and ethnic identities, often at odds with each other (1996c). Drawing attention to the contested issue of belonging, Gray explored the possibility of living in two places at once (Ireland and Britain) potentially belonging in neither, to illustrate the multi-located sense of Irishness that her respondents revealed (2000b:177).

More than creating the space in which women's accounts might be heard, Gray's project is to complicate and contest the category 'Irish woman'; to explore the silences and omissions that are demanded of women in order to 'fit' into established notions of Irishness. She uses the accounts she has collected to highlight the need to 'break from unifying notions of national identity' (1998:147) and calls for the 'transformation of both Irishness and Irish diaspora [to] provid[e] more heterogeneous spaces and forms of identification that will more fully incorporate feminine subjectivities' (1997b:231).

In an academic capacity, Walter, a social geographer, continued to explore the disadvantaged position of Irish women in British society and the causes of this (1989b, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Hickman & Walter, 1995).¹⁹ In 2001, she published a full-length study devoted to Irish women and migration (Walter, 2001). Quantitative research has continued to form the basis of much of Walter's work, in which she has profiled the socio-economic and demographic position of Irish women in Britain (1991, 1995, 1997). She has also highlighted the changing position of Irish women

migrants in Britain over time (1997). Elsewhere, she has explored themes raised in earlier articles, such as the 'double invisibility' of Irish women, which she links to notions of Irish national identity and British constructions of Irishness which fail to take into account the experiences of women (1995; Hickman & Walter, 1995).

Another theme to emerge from Walter's work in the mid-1990s was the uncontested category of 'whiteness' in Britain and the myth of homogeneity that this represented (Hickman & Walter, 1995). Walter argues that since the 1950s, and in response to the immigration of non-white peoples, Britain has clung to a false notion of 'the indigenous' as white, which has masked internal divisions and boundaries, concealing the historic racialisation of the Irish in/by Britain and its continued relevance in the contemporary period (1995, 1998). Walter explores the ways in which Irish women are hidden by masculine stereotypes of Irishness in Britain which, while offering no protection from processes of othering and racialisation, serve to homogenise all Irish women into a single, forgotten category (1995, 1999a). Walter's argument is that as 'white' but still 'different' Irish men and women are placed in a paradoxical position in Britain, at once both inside and outside the category 'us', and that gender is another important variable to be considered in this positioning.

These themes were brought to the fore in Walter's book, *Outsiders Inside* (2001). In addition, Walter compared the position and social elevation of Irish women in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century to that of Irish women in Britain to illustrate the specificity of destination in influencing women's position and visibility (see also 1999b). The main aim of Walter's book, however, was to develop a framework in which

to contextualise the experiences of Irish women in Britain (2001:5). Drawing particularly on Brah's notion of 'diasporic space' (1995), Walter suggested that diaspora was the only framework which adequately accounted for Irish women's 'doubled identity' in Britain – their sense both of placement in Britain and displacement from Ireland (2001:194-214, 215-265).

Walter used notions of 'home' and being 'at home' to explore issues of identity and belonging amongst second-wave Irish women migrants (2001). Highlighting the heterogeneity in their articulations of self, she pointed to the women's sense of belonging in Britain and continued attachment to Irishness, achieved for the most part by maintaining contact with Ireland and through the institution of the Catholic Church in Britain. Indeed, family and Catholicism were shown to be important factors of Irish identity (2001:199, 213). Conceptually, diaspora enabled Walter to make sense of the constant renegotiation of doubled identities, although she emphasised also the pain of displacement involved in this (2001:259).

Both Gray and Walter explore gendered notions of Irish national identity through the collection and analysis of women's accounts of their experiences of migration. However, Walter explores the experiences of women over a longer historical period, while Gray is more concerned with migrants of the 1980s. In addition, Gray's approach is more transnational, while Walter is especially concerned to locate the 'specificity of diasporic women's situations within the [British and North American] societies of which they are a part' (2001:5). Another important distinction is the different emphases of each: Gray uses women's accounts to challenge and theorise concepts of Irish national identity while

Walter uses diaspora as a conceptual framework to make sense of women's accounts of Irishness.

In addition to *Outsiders Inside* (2001), another study of Irish women's migration has recently been published: Sharon Lambert's *Irish Women in Lancashire, 1922-1960: Their Story* (2001). From an historical perspective, Lambert's oral-history approach reflects the more general methodological tendency identified earlier to let women's voices be heard, and she has acknowledged the influence of feminist history on her own work (2001:7). Allowing the thematic emphasis to be guided by the interviews themselves, Lambert explored the role of family and religion in women's lives. Her argument is that whether women left Ireland for social or economic reasons, it was usually to fulfil family more than individual needs (2001:23). Challenging arguments put forward by Kennedy (1973) and O'Carroll (1990), Lambert revealed that most of the women she spoke to held on to their religion post-migration, and continued to maintain relations with family in Ireland. By exploring personal relations and attitudes to personal morality (areas of enquiry that remained out of reach to quantitative research methods), she highlighted the significance of family and religion in shaping her respondents' lives both before and after migration to Lancashire.

Lambert devoted her final chapter to the issue of national identity. She explored the formation of national identity in Ireland, the strength of a sense of Irishness amongst her respondents at the time of their migration, and the ways in which it was maintained, transformed or lost afterwards (2001:82-99). Lambert argued that Irish women were under greater pressure *not* to assimilate in Britain because of the post-colonial relationship

that existed between Ireland and Britain (2001:102). Bringing her themes together, she showed the relevance of family and religion to the women in maintaining, exhibiting and passing on a sense of Irishness (2001:91-97). As Gray (2000b) and Walter (2001) had done, Lambert drew attention to the complex sense of belonging and non-belonging felt by Irish migrant women both in Ireland and Britain (2000:98).

Gray, Walter and Lambert's work might be said to represent 'the state of the art' of literature specific to Irish women's migration to Britain. Although advancing from different perspectives, they use similar methods to explore the personal experience of migration for Irish women of different ages, in different regions, and belonging to different 'waves' of Irish migration. The theoretical emphasis is on identity and belonging. Diaspora has also proved to be an important concept, while another theme which draws these three together is the emphasis they put on national identity.

In tracing the development of literature that focuses specifically on Irish women's migration to Britain, this section has drawn attention to the various perspectives, academic and non-academic, from which it has grown and which make it truly interdisciplinary.²⁰ Methodological approaches associated with feminism and a commitment to providing a space in which women's voices are heard binds the material together. As was the case in the more general material reviewed previously, identity is a theme that runs throughout this literature. One of the significant ways, however, in which the women-centred literature differs from more general accounts is in the way identity is explored. Rather than using statistical records or census material to make claims about them, women are themselves asked to articulate the ways and means by which they define a sense of self,

embody and articulate an identity as Irish women and how they feel ignored or excluded as Irish women.

It is not just the focus of its gendered analysis, then, that distinguishes this literature from more general studies on Irish migration, but its approach and direction. Women are not simply ‘added in’. Rather, new ways of exploring and thinking about migration have been generated. The literature reviewed in this section reveals that migration is rarely only a physical journey and is more often a psychological one too, not from point A to point B but incorporating both these places in complex, gendered and often contradictory ways.

Irish Women Religious: Forgotten Migrants

As the previous two sections illustrated, religion, and especially Catholicism, is a major theme that runs throughout the literature on Irish migration to Britain. Catholicism has also been the focus of two full-length studies on Irish migrants in nineteenth century Britain (Fielding, 1993; Hickman, 1995). Indeed, such is the influence of Irish Catholic migration, it has been suggested that since the beginning of the nineteenth century the ‘story of Catholicism in Britain is largely the story of Irish immigration’ (Scott, 1967:11).²¹ However, one area remains almost entirely ignored: none of the studies on Irish Catholicism in or migration to Britain explore in any way the position, influence or experience of Irish women religious.²² Fielding, in a study subtitled ‘Irish Catholics in England’, makes one short reference to nuns although he neither makes clear if it is Irish nuns he is referring to nor explores their history further (1993:64). It is ironic that this reference comes in a chapter entitled ‘The Church and its People’, appropriately reflecting

the lack of attention shown to women religious either as part of the institutional Church *or* its people. However, Fielding should not be singled out. No scholarly work on Irish migration to Britain takes account of women religious.²³

In a personal communication (1999), Claire Barrington mentioned that she felt it important to include a picture of nuns in her annotated bibliography (1997:20) because they were an important part of the stereotypical image of Irish women in Britain,²⁴ something Wall (1991) also identified. However, the only attention given to nuns in the literature on migration is evident in three separate interviews with Irish nuns living in Britain, printed in Lennon *et al* (1988), Wall (1991) and Holohan (1995). In each case, the women talk principally about the work they are involved in,²⁵ which emphasises their functionalist relationship to others, often at the expense of their own subjectivities. In the case of Wall (1991) at least, by presenting these nuns as ‘normal’ and ‘modern’ (even controversial), the intention is to challenge the stereotypical image of Irish nuns as ‘bible-thumping, mysterious, celibate figure[s], swathed in black ...subservient to a male hierarchical church’ (1991:10). However, the women’s accounts reveal more about the people they work for and the organisations they work in than their own experiences of migration to and life in Britain.

Lennon *et al* (1988), Wall (1991) and Holohan (1995) follow a similar format: through transcribed, edited interviews, guided by themes set by the author, we hear the ‘voices’ of the women religious. There is no attempt (nor is it the intention of the authors) to analyse or contextualise what the women say and why it might differ from the accounts of other Irish women. For instance, no opportunity exists to explore Sr. Joan Kane’s identification

as 'Irish and a woman' (in Holohan, 1995:113). Likewise, in the context of her work with state and other international agencies, Sr. Deirdre Duffy says she has 'identified as English' (in Wall, 1991:92) which immediately begs the question, how is it that she is able to take on an identity that so many other Irish women have apparently felt uncomfortable with?

As they are ignored in the literature on Irish migration to Britain, it seems worthwhile examining what has been written about nuns in Ireland. In addition to shorter studies, two full-length scholarly works dedicated to Irish nuns exist, both of which focus on the nineteenth century. Caitriona Clear (1987b) highlights the constraints placed upon women religious by the Church and their lowly position within its hierarchy. Her argument is that although members of the most powerful institution in nineteenth century Ireland, nuns were essentially powerless, subject always to the authority of others (1989, 1987b:47-8). Furthermore, she suggests, the limits placed upon their freedom prevented a common identity developing into a concrete expression of solidarity (1989:45).

By contrast, Magray (1998) draws attention to the pioneering spirit and substantial achievements of the founders and leaders of women's religious congregations in Ireland from the mid-eighteenth century. She describes these women variously as 'autonomous', 'strong', 'competent and confident' (1998:13, 31, 130), a feature, she suggests, of their elevated class background. However, she argues that this began to change in the early part of the nineteenth century as the Church developed into a strong, national organisation and started to assert greater authority over women religious. This coincided with a change in the demographic makeup of convents. Increasingly, their number was drawn from the

lower middle-classes – women who, Magray suggests, ‘lacked the class authority and elevated status’ of their forebears (1998:126) and became less pioneering and more obedient as a result:

By the mid-nineteenth century, a new model of Catholic womanhood emerged which prized docility above most other qualities ... The creators and enforcers [of this] were the very Irish nuns themselves and in doing so they robbed themselves of their own autonomy (Magray, 1998:130).

Clear suggests that religious life put constraints on women, Magray that women in religious life imposed these restraints from within (at least from the mid-nineteenth century). Although their emphasis is very different, they reach broadly the same conclusion: that by the late nineteenth century religious life offered women little autonomy, that nuns were subject to the authority of others and were guilty of perpetuating patriarchal Catholic ideology in their schools and institutions. Certainly this is the position taken by Inglis looking at Catholicism in twentieth-century Irish society, when he argues that nuns were facilitators, passing on idealised notions of passive womanhood to the girls they taught (1998). Lee (1978) also emphasised the constraints upon women religious.

Some dissenting voices have been heard, however. Fahy (1987) suggests that religious life at least gave women the space in which to pursue religious and educational objectives while O'Dowd briefly noted that the influence of women religious in providing an alternative path to marriage and motherhood had yet to be explored (1987:18). Although Beale illustrated the processes by which women religious had ‘found their voice’ since Vatican II, she was not concerned to dispute the accepted view of religious as passive and submissive before that time (1987:164-183). Leading the challenge has been Margaret

MacCurtain who has highlighted the achievements of Irish religious in the twentieth century in the areas of health, education, training and missionary work (1982, 1995, 1997), questioning the commonly accepted view that women religious ‘crowded into convents only because of economic and social conditions’ (1995:43).

Positioned as passive, subservient, powerless figures, detached from ‘real life’ and guilty of perpetuating patriarchal gender ideologies of the Catholic Church, women religious have been ignored by ‘mainstream’, religious²⁶ and gender history, considered, as Clear put it ‘half-clergy, half-women and not enough of either to merit examination’ (Clear 1987b:xviii).²⁷ These dominant discourses about women religious have contributed to the lack of attention paid to them. In the curiously persistent distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’, whereby the Catholic Church is regarded as a public institution, but the work and life of nuns within it are seen as an extension of the domestic sphere, women religious have been ignored. Metaphors of movement are gendered masculine (Gray, 1999:199; Ní Laoire, 1999:236; Walter, 2001:195) and migration is regarded as an ‘act’, of defiance, powerlessness, even treachery. Although traditionally ignored in the literature on Irish migration to Britain, scholars are now beginning to challenge this and subvert the dichotomous distinction between masculine ‘movement’ and feminine ‘staying put’. The discursive positioning of nuns as meek and passive, however, means their stories of movement have yet to be told.²⁸

Research Questions

Although the sets of literature reviewed above have failed to explore the experiences of Irish women religious as migrants to England, they have influenced this research and proved useful in devising research questions to guide it. This is especially the case with studies on Irish women's migration to Britain, and the work of Gray and Walter in particular. The research questions that are outlined in this section were formulated in response to the existing literature, either out of a desire to pose 'already-asked' questions to a group of women not previously considered or to put forward new questions not previously asked about Irish women's migration. The questions include broad-ranging inquiries as well as more direct investigations of gendered, religious and Irish identity. Although particular questions are explored in certain parts of the thesis that follows, they informed the research in its entirety and should not be seen as existing distinctly from one another.

The causes of migration and post-migrant Irish identities are themes that run through both the general literature and that which pertains specifically to women. One of the motivations for this research was to explore whether economics and gender were important factors in the processes that brought Irish women to religious life in England. In addition, I was concerned to explore if religious life had an impact upon the kind of Irish identity women religious could exhibit and perform in England, especially given the connection many studies on Irish migration to Britain make between Irishness and Catholicism. Did entry to religious life complicate, negate or reinforce an Irish identity? Did the particular relationship between Britain and Ireland influence the experiences of

Irish women religious? Did the women encounter discrimination, disadvantage or racialisation as Irish people? Did they feel they had assimilated or integrated into British society and if so, on what basis – congregational affiliation, socio-economic status, colour? Notions of Irishness have tended to construct Irish women in particular ways, as mothers who ‘should’ reside within the nation. What might the consequences be for Irish women living outside Ireland, who take a vow of celibacy? What kind of claim on womanhood and Irishness might they have? How might ‘belonging’ and ‘home’, notions often associated with the family, be affected by religious life?

Because the literature on Irish migration has thus far ignored women religious as migrants, we do not know how they position themselves. The fact that Catholic religious congregations are very often international organisations, part of the transnational (supra-national?) religion of Catholicism and the institution of the Catholic Church, could have implications for Irish women religious living in England. Would it allow or enable women religious to have a more fluid relationship to fixed nationality? How might this work within a country where nuns have been stereotyped precisely as Irish? Would Irish women religious see themselves as part of an ‘Irish community’ in England? Might diaspora be a useful concept in exploring their position?

With respect to previous studies on Irish women religious, I particularly wanted to engage with debates surrounding autonomy: does religious life stifle autonomy? Are women religious, or were women who entered religious life, passive recipients/victims of patriarchal control or were they active agents? Did religious reproduce, pass on or

represent a particular notion of womanhood as passive and subservient or were they representative of an alternative lifestyle for women? Are they 'half-women'?

Applying themes raised in the existing literature to a group of women ignored by it, I was also concerned to explore issues I felt had been omitted. Gray and Walter's starting point is ethnic/national identities and the ways in which these are gendered – symbolically, theoretically and in the lived experiences of Irish women. The starting point of this thesis is the women themselves and the processes by which they formulate their own self-identities, not only at a national or ethnic level but also in terms of religion and gender; not only in the context of migration but through religious life, work, class, gender, femininity and other factors; not only in one period, but across time and place. In contrast to the approach taken by others, my interest is in exploring the various ways in which women construct themselves and are constructed by others, across a range of different sites and, retrospectively, over time. This enables a broader perspective than the biaxial approach of Gray, Walter and others. Covering both the historical and contemporary period, it incorporates the women's experiences of growing up in Ireland, entry into and life within religious congregations, migration to England (and elsewhere), fluctuating Anglo-Irish relations and shifting discourses of Irish womanhood, Irishness and religious life. I ask what negotiations have taken place within and across these identities, over time and place, and in response to what internal, personal or external factors.

In addition to identity (and related to it), I am also interested in exploring the women's agency: not only their capacity to act but what these actions mean for them. In fact, 'meaning' is a theme that runs throughout this thesis because I believe that the meanings

the women attach to the actions they take are a fundamental part of their identity. Since identity projects are also social projects, I want to explore not only how the women made sense of themselves and their own position, but how they perceived others to be reading them – and how they understood this in turn.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis, I explore the questions outlined above through an analysis of oral history accounts collected from Irish women religious. My approach has obviously been influenced by the literatures reviewed in the previous sections. However, in developing a conceptual framework through which to approach the women's accounts I have also drawn on the work of several other authors, few of whom have explored Irish women or women religious directly but whose work I have been able to adapt for my own purposes. The approaches taken by Dorinne Kondo, Beverly Skeggs and Pat O'Connor has proved useful in exploring gender identity formation in general.²⁹ In addition, I have found Pierre Bourdieu's concept of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, the concept of diaspora and Avtar Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' useful in exploring women's subjectivity and their positioning by others. The following sub-sections explore this in more detail.

Thinking Through Identity Formation

In an ethnographic study of Japanese workers (1990), anthropologist Dorinne Kondo explored the ways in which her co-workers constructed themselves with respect to work, family, community and Japanese society. She took issue with the continued (Western)

tendency to rely on notions of 'the self' as bounded, interiorised or divisible from the world. Instead, she revealed the self to be a multiple category, constructed within particular historical, cultural, political, economic and linguistic contexts and within shifting fields of power and meaning (1990:10). Kondo's approach to identity formation was necessarily broad: she did not consider identity to be fixed but 'negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous' (1990:47) and found it more useful to talk of 'selves' than a unitary or essential 'self' (1990:28).

Importantly, Kondo recognised that individuals occupied multiple subject positions simultaneously – as workers, wives, mothers and so on – and that the meanings of these positions were themselves shifting, open to interpretation over time and in different contexts. This was most tellingly revealed in her exploration of the various positions occupied by her female factory co-workers. As part-time and female workers, they were considered 'marginal', yet they were critically important as eroticised objects and provided an audience for the performance of masculinity within the factory. The women, in response to their marginalised position as workers, tended to emphasise their links to the domestic, presenting themselves as wives or mothers. However, their very presence in the factory and their attempts to claim a more central place within it challenged the gender ideology that their male workers (and inadvertently themselves) were trying to maintain (1990:45, 258-299). In this and other examples, Kondo showed that concepts of the self could not be abstracted from notions of power or power relations (1990:43).

Although Kondo challenged the notion of an ‘essential self’ divorced from context, she was not suggesting that individuals were constructed by context alone and certainly did not deny agency. Indeed, her interest was in the ways individuals:

[C]reate, construct, work on and enact their identities, sometimes creatively challenging limits of cultural constraints which constitute both what we call selves and the ways those selves can be crafted (1990:48).

The title of Kondo’s book, *Crafting Selves*, neatly summarised her approach, emphasising the fluidity of identity, the importance of agency and the principle of plurality (1990:48).

Similarly, Beverly Skeggs (1997), in her exploration of identity formation amongst the white, working-class English women who formed the basis of her study, recognised the centrality of context and the processes of negotiation through which women articulated a sense of self. She was also keen to emphasise the dialogic relationship in subjective construction – the way individuals/groups identify their positioning by others and are influenced in constructing a sense of self in response (1997:4). Skeggs did not regard the women she spoke to as mere ciphers from which subject positions could be easily or simply read. Rather she saw them as active agents who were actively involved in the production of meanings attached to the subject positions they willingly, reluctantly or, indeed, refused to inhabit (such as ‘working class’, ‘respectable’ and ‘feminine’) (1997:2).

The approaches Kondo and Skeggs take to gendered identity formation, in all its complexity, have informed the framework I have developed in analysing the myriad ways in which the women of this study presented themselves as women, as religious and as Irish women in the context of past, contemporary and shifting meanings of these subject

positions over time and place. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, I am interested not only in exploring concepts of 'Irish womanhood', 'religious life' and 'Irishness' over time and place, but to explore also the different ways in which individual women negotiate a sense of self in relation to these and other categories (including class and age). I am not interested in providing a theory or representation of 'Irish religious womanhood' because I do not think any such essential category exists. Rather, I try to show the varied methods of identity formation that exist within a relatively small group of women that are all Irish, are all nuns and have all experienced migration from Ireland to England.

The broad approaches used by Kondo and Skeggs to explore identity formation are particularly valuable because they recognise the significance of structures, context and power relations, which allows for a more complex analysis of processes of negotiation and contestation that the women of this study revealed. Although their approach to identity is not unique (Hall (1996), Gilroy (1997) and others have developed similarly fluid notions of identity) their attention to gender has proved particularly useful for this study.³⁰

Kondo and Skeggs explored gendered identity formation in Japan and England respectively. In the context of Ireland, I have found the work of Pat O'Connor (1998) useful, providing an extra layer in my conceptual framework. O'Connor is not concerned with Irish women as migrants. Nor is her study based on oral histories. But she does, in exploring the position of women in contemporary Ireland, identify dominant notions of Irish womanhood which 'are part of the cultural tradition out of which Irish women weave the fabric of their own identity and the meaning of their lives' (1998:81). O'Connor suggests that socially formulated concepts of womanhood in Ireland have traditionally

constructed women in relation to caring, the family (as wives and mothers), reproduction, sexual attraction and gendered paid employment (1998:81-108). Although O'Connor recognises the emergence of newer concepts of womanhood, influenced by the women's movement of the 1970s, through which women are beginning to make a claim on 'personhood', she argues that discourses of Irish womanhood continue to revolve around 'traditional' themes (1998:21).

According to O'Connor, the ascribed position of women in Irish society 'assume[s] their relative disinterest in the 'normal' male trappings of individuality' (1998:5) and positions them in a functionalist relationship with others³¹ which obscures their individual subjectivity. O'Connor is keen to point out, however, that while certain discourses can dominate concepts of womanhood and serve to conceal alternatives, they do not negate the existence of submerged discourses or individual women's 'agency and ingenuity in constructing their own definitions of self' (1998:82).

I have found O'Connor's work useful because it is precisely in relation to, sometimes against, dominant, submerged and emerging discourses of Irish womanhood – including religious life, although this is not a concept of womanhood O'Connor mentions – that I have analysed my respondent's accounts. O'Connor suggests that women in Ireland have not traditionally been given the space to voice or publicly acknowledge their individuality, but that increasingly the space is developing in which to make a claim as 'persons', although this is not without its problems. I have found this useful in exploring the complexity and tension surrounding both individuality and 'personhood' in the women's accounts.

The works I have cited above were themselves influenced by various theories/ists including social constructionism, Foucault and feminism. However, the aim of their authors was not to force feminist meanings from the accounts studied. Nor is this my intention. Rather, what their approach and mine seeks to do is explore women's subjectivity and identity formation. While I am not suggesting that all the women reflected in this thesis are feminists, I do try to represent them as active subjects, 'producing' themselves within and against gendered and other constraints.

Forms of 'Capital'

Pierre Bourdieu is concerned to explore the organisation of society and the relations of domination within. He bases his social theory on two interdependent concepts: 'habitus' and 'the field'. The field is defined as any (competitive) system of social relations which functions according to its own logic (Moi, 1991:1021-2). Bourdieu himself describes it as a 'network or ...configuration of objective relations between positions' (1992:97). The whole 'social cosmos', Bourdieu says, is made up of a multitude of these 'autonomous social microcosms' (1992:97). Particular fields that he has explored include the educational system and the religious field (1984, 1991) but, as Moi notes, what makes Bourdieu so useful is that his social theories can be applied to any (particular or general) social field (1991:1019-20).

The logic or set of rules that organise the field is its habitus (1985). The habitus is a way of thinking and acting – 'dispositions' Bourdieu called them (1977:72) – not consciously

learned but which ‘social subjects acquire during their socialisation’ (Lovell, 2000:12), such that they come to be regarded as ‘common sense’ (Bourdieu, 1977:80). It is on the point of habitus that Bourdieu parts company with structuralism because, although he believes the habitus to be powerful and influential, he does not see it as ‘a stimulus which conditions how we must behave’ (Robbins, 2000:29). This tension is summed up in Bourdieu’s own definition of the habitus as a ‘system of durable, transposable dispositions: structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (1977:72).³² Nor does he see the habitus or the positions held by individuals or groups within the field as fixed or natural. Thus, he has spoken of fluid ‘positions’ rather than ‘situations’ which imply inertia.

Within the field (and according to its habitus), individuals and groups are positioned in relation to the amount of ‘capital’ they hold (1983, 1987). Bourdieu identifies four types of capital. Economic capital refers to money or assets that could be converted into money. Cultural capital refers to non-monetary assets which occurred in an embodied state (within the person, such as the pronunciations characteristic of a class or region), in an objectified state (cultural goods such as art, books and so on) and in an institutionalised state (such as academic qualifications or titles) (Bourdieu, 1983). Social capital he defines as the value accrued from connections and group membership. Finally, symbolic capital is the form these different types of capital take when they are recognised as ‘legitimate’ (Bourdieu, 1987, 1992). Types of capital, its amount and life trajectory (how it is transformed throughout life histories) all determine an individual/group’s social positioning within the field (McCall, 1992:840).

To give an example, Tom Inglis drew on Bourdieuan theory to explore the particular habitus of Irish Catholicism, which included the acceptance of certain beliefs, the performance of particular practices and the general recognition of the authority of the institutional Church within Irish society (1998:17). Inglis argued that Catholicism played a large part in the struggle for economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital in Irish society (1998:17). Being a 'good Catholic' legitimated whatever capital a person had already accumulated and could also benefit an individual more directly by helping them to get contacts and jobs, 'be elected, be educated, be well known and liked' (1998:11).³³ I have found Bourdieu's notion of capital useful in exploring how women are positioned by others, how they attempt to position themselves and the shifting values of the capital they and their families accumulate over time and place, not only with respect to gender but also Catholicism (including their value as religious) and ethnicity (as Irish in England and elsewhere).

Although Bourdieu explored gender domination and argued that the accumulation of symbolic capital was gendered, it was an area of his work that is undertheorised (Moi, 1991:1020). Some feminists have, however, appropriated his theories (see, for example, Moi, 1991; McCall 1992; Lovell, 2000). In her exploration of Bourdieu as a resource for feminism, Lovell identified one of the shortcomings in his work as his tendency to see women as social objects, mere 'repositories of value and capital ... which are appropriated and deployed by men as assets in their jostlings for position with one another' (2000:21-2). Lovell argued instead that women should also be seen as capital-accumulating subjects. While she recognised the universal position of women as objects, Lovell questioned whether women regarded themselves only in this way and drew upon the work

of Skeggs and Moi to reinforce Rose's claim that women rarely, if ever, 'painlessly slip into their roles as women' (Rose quoted in Lovell, 2000:31). I have used Lovell's appropriation of Bourdieu especially to explore the different meanings the women of this study and their families applied to religious life.

Diaspora and 'Diaspora Space'

Traditionally associated most especially with the Jewish scattering, the term diaspora has been more broadly defined in recent times and used to describe the em/im/migration of different categories of people including exiles, expatriates, guest workers, political refugees, alien residents, immigrant, ethnic and racial minorities (Safran, 1991; Tololyan, 1991). In response to this, Cohen (1997:x) proposed that diasporas existed in different 'forms' ('victim', 'labour', 'trade', 'imperial' and 'cultural') and recommended a more expansive definition of the term. He suggested that diasporas, no matter the form, shared some of the following features: dispersal from the homeland to two or more foreign regions; expansion from the homeland to pursue work, trade or colonial ambitions; collective memory/myth about the homeland; idealisation of the homeland and a commitment to maintaining, restoring (or even creating) it; the possibility of return; an ethnic consciousness that survived over time; a troubled relationship with the host society; a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries; and the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in the host society (Cohen, 1997:26). Cohen recognised that diasporic groups could take more than one form and that the form(s) they took could change over time (1997:x).

Clifford suggests diaspora is a term now 'loose on the world' (1994:306). One of the reasons it has become more widespread is that as a concept, it is more inclusive and malleable than migration, capable of recognising the importance of origin, destination and the social and psychological space that exists between them. Being less fixed in time or place, diaspora allows us to think *across* time and space, providing a conceptual framework which brings together 'roots and routes' (Clifford, 1994:308; 1997). It enables us to consider the possibility of displacement and placement co-existing in parallel rather than only in sequence (Walter, 1999b:313). Through diaspora, we can approach identity in a more fluid and less fixed way. Indeed, it de-stabilises the notion of a fixed identity, allowing us, as Gilroy puts it, to 'break the dogmatic focus on discrete national dynamics' (1993:6). Hall suggests the potential fluidity of diaspora when he says that it is:

[D]efined not by essence and purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diasporic identities are those which are constantly produced and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference (1990:235).

As Clifford has noted, gender has been undertheorised in diasporic explorations (1994:313) although the work of Brah (1996), Gray (1996a, 1996d, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a, 2000b) and Walter (1999, 2000) provide a challenge to this.

In her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah used concepts of diaspora, borders and the politics of location as the basis for an historical analysis of contemporary trans-national movements of people, information, cultural commodities and capital (1996:181). Believing it impossible to separate diaspora from the related concepts of borders and dis/locations, Brah developed the notion of 'diaspora space' as the site of intersection of these categories, where 'boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and

otherness, of us and them, are contested' (1996:209). Brah challenged the notion of 'native' versus 'migrant': a psychological centre wherein the 'majority' was located and a corresponding 'periphery' wherein the 'minorities' were positioned. She suggested instead 'diaspora space', a place 'inhabited':

...not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous ...where the native is as much a diasporian as the *diasporian is the native* (1996:209, emphasis in original).

Brah's 'diaspora space' enables us to think of the inter-relationship not only between diasporic groups and the 'indigenous', or between a diasporic group and an imagined/real homeland, but also of the intersectionality of different diasporic groups with each other, either through or outside a relationship with the 'indigenous'. So, for example, in the diaspora space that is England, we could explore the inter-relationship between the Irish diaspora and England/Englishness, as well as the relationship between the Irish diaspora and Ireland/Irishness and in relation to other diasporic groups within England. Also, by incorporating gender (and other differentials) within her analysis, Brah's appropriation of diaspora is useful for feminist research.

In the context of Ireland, although diaspora has been appropriated to describe, define and explore Irishness and Irish migration (in addition to Gray and Walter, see, for example, Akenson, 1993; Bielenberg, 2000; Corcoran, 1998; Fanning, 2000), there has been some debate over the efficacy of the term. As mentioned in the introduction, Lloyd (1994) suggests that diaspora, in the Irish context, has been used in a positive and celebratory manner,³⁴ which both de-politicises Irish migration and homogenises all Irish migrants. Likewise, Gray has shown some reluctance in fully embracing diaspora for this reason,

because appropriations of diaspora in Ireland have failed to transcend the national (1997b, 2000b) but also because, conceptually, diaspora has tended to conceal internal gender, class and other differences (1997b). Despite these limitations, however, it is a term Gray employs to make sense of the oral narratives she has collected. Recognising the limitations others have noted with respect to how diaspora has been used, Walter (1999b, 2001) embraces its potential in explaining Irish women's paradoxical position in Britain as both insider and outside, belonging and not belonging. In this thesis, I consider how useful the concept of diaspora and Brah's 'diaspora space' are in locating the women of this study's experience of Irishness; their relationship and investment in an Irish homeland; their positioning by themselves and others as Irish; and their sense of selves as Irish women religious living in England.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to do three particular things: to review literature relevant to Irish migration to Britain, Irish women's migration to Britain and Irish women religious; to set out the research questions that have guided this research and so establish the ways in which these sets of literature have shaped the approach taken; and to describe the conceptual framework adopted to analyse oral histories of Irish women religious. The story of Irish migration to Britain can never fully be written: it is neither fixed nor finite. However, in exploring what has been written thus far, certain themes emerge, as do manifest omissions. The literature reviews in the first section of this chapter showed that although the experiences of women have tended to be hidden in studies of Irish migration to Britain, the growing body of research on Irish women is beginning to challenge this,

influencing and altering the direction of Irish migration studies as it does. However, neither in traditional studies of Irish migration which seemed to assume it was a masculine pursuit nor in more recent attempts to recover the experiences of Irish women have women religious been adequately recognised as migrants. An exploration of studies of Irish women religious in Ireland revealed unresolved debates concerning autonomy and passivity.

In the second section of the chapter, the framework developed to analyse the oral histories of Irish women religious was advanced to illustrate that the approach taken to identity formation in this thesis is one that recognises identity as fluid and multiple; subjectivities as negotiated and contingent/contextual; and women as actively engaged in the production of their own sense of self. It is also one influenced by Bourdieuan notions of capital as well as concepts of diaspora and diaspora space advanced by other theorists, which will be brought to bear in the chapters that follow.

¹ Statistical records of Irish migration to Britain will be explored in chapter 4.

² Two volumes on Irish migration to Scotland were published in the 1940s (Handley, 1943; 1947). Greater scholarly attention has been paid to Irish migration to the U.S. and some elsewhere (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 1984, 1995; Ignatiev, 1995; Kenny, 2000; Miller, 1985; O'Brien & Travers, 1991). Although this material was consulted during the course of this thesis, my own research is not situated particularly within this literature and, as a result, this literature is left out of this discussion.

³ In census and other official documentation, Irish people were not regarded as an ethnic minority. The 2001 census was the first census to include 'Irish' as an ethnic category.

⁴ A plethora of reports were published in the 1980s and 1990s, many of which are listed at the end of the bibliography. See also Connor (1987), Harrison & Carr Hill (1992), Kowarzik (1994, 1996), O'Flynn (1991), O'Flynn (1993) and Walls (1996).

⁵ Relevant chapters will be examined in the next section

⁶ With the exception of the dedicated volume, only one other chapter (Tranter, 2000) focused especially on women.

⁷ Advice guides for migrants bear this out, published as they often are by the Catholic Church or voluntary agencies associated with it. For a contemporary example see Curran (1995). Information also came from non-Church, non-government sources. See, for example, Gaffney (1937) and Brown (1953). However, a government task force on Irish migration has recently been set up in Ireland.

⁸ Most of the literature which focuses on Irish migration to Britain has come from Britain itself. Pre-migratory studies from within Ireland include academic studies (e.g. Hannan, 1970; MacLaughlin, 1991,

1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Walsh, 1984), cultural commentaries (O'Brien, 1954) and guides for migrants (Kelly & Nic Giolla Choille, 1990).

⁹ Rates of female migration will be explored in greater detail in chapter 4. Travers (1995) notes, however, that between 1871 and 1971, female migration outnumbered male migration from Ireland overall and in six decades. In fact, ignoring intercensal differences, on average 15,983 women left Ireland each year between 1871 and 1971. The figure for men was 15,707 (Travers, 1995:147).

¹⁰ It should be noted that general approaches, although for the most part 'about' men, tend not to focus on issues of gender at all, including masculinity.

¹¹ Greater scholarly attention has been given to Irish women's migration to the U.S. See, for example, Diner (1983), Nolan (1989) and O'Carroll (1990).

¹² As both a full-length study and because it represents the direction I feel studies on Irish women's migration seems to be taking, Lambert's (2000) book will be reviewed in greater detail towards the end of this section.

¹³ A point also made by one of the co-authors of *Across the Water* in a separate article (McAdam, 1994).

¹⁴ This was hardly surprising given the porous boundary between 'official' or local government sponsored social policy and academia. Many of the authors of these reports were themselves academics.

¹⁵ The mass exodus of people from Ireland following the Great Famine of the 1840s has been referred to as the 'first great wave' of Irish migration. The 'second wave' relates to that period of increased migration which began as early as the mid-1930s and lasted until the 1960s (Delaney, 2000:45). A third 'wave' was identified in the 1980s. Often studies focus on one short period within a 'wave'.

¹⁶ This may be because the chapter was based on a much larger study of identity amongst Irish people living in Britain that did not attend to the question of gender (see Kells, 1995b, 2000).

¹⁷ As Gray suggests, it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate Irishness when it is associated with such diverse elements as Catholicism, rural romanticism, international pop-groups such as U2 and the Irish-dancing sensation 'Riverdance' (Gray, 1997b).

¹⁸ However, she clings to diaspora as an enabling theory in finding new ways to talk about Irishness (2000b).

¹⁹ Walter's non-gender specific work has also been referenced in the previous section.

²⁰ As Barrington's (1997) bibliography reveals.

²¹ A number of studies on Catholicism in Britain highlight the importance of Irish migration. See, for example, Badham (1989), Buchanan & Conway (1996), Coman (1977), Gilley & Sheils (1994); Gwynn (1950), Hill (1972), Hornsby-Smith (1987) Mathew (1938) and Scott (1967).

²² Some references are made to Irish religious in broader studies of congregations in nineteenth century England (McAdam, 1999; O'Brien, 1988, 1990), but none focus on Irish women especially.

²³ Although one of Lambert's (2001) respondents was a religious, her story post-migration is not explored. As mentioned in the introduction, some attention has been given to Irish religious' migration to North America and Australia. See Conway (1992), Hoy, (1994, 1995) and Tranter (2000).

²⁴ Although, however, only four of the two hundred-plus works cited focused on religious in any detail and none of these explored their experience of migration.

²⁵ One of these women, Sarah Clarke, has written a book about her experiences working for Irish prisoners in British gaols (Clarke, 1995). It should be noted that religious do not generally record their experiences in print. For the most part, writing by religious has tended to be complimentary or congratulatory accounts of congregations and their founders. Since Vatican II, religious have published more widely (especially, but not exclusively, in North America) on a wide range of subjects including Christian feminism (see for example, Murphy (1994)). However, few studies concentrate on religious' experiences as women.

²⁶ In studies of Irish missionaries, less attention has been given to women (see, for example, Hogan, 1990).

²⁷ It is worth noting that in North America, a very different (and more feminist) reading of religious life is offered by, for example, Danylewycz (1987) and McNamara (1996).

²⁸ An exception is Hoy and MacCurtain (1994), although their focus is on nineteenth century Irish religious' women's migration to the U.S.

²⁹ In addition, I was influenced by writings on identity formation with respect to migration (Carter *et al*, 1993; Chambers, 1994; Cohen, 1994; duGay *et al* 2000; Webster, 1998).

³⁰ Likewise see Anzaldúa (1987) and Probyn (1996).

³¹ Including, as Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1992) would argue, the nation. Rather than be citizens *within* the nation, women are regarded as symbols *of* and reproducers and cultural carriers *for* the nation.

³² Although, as Lovell has shown, Bourdieu's notion of habitus 'suggests no easy freedom to adapt or change the self' (2000:15). In answering the claim that the habitus ruled out strategic choice or conscious deliberation, Bourdieu replied that it certainly did not and that the 'immediate fit between habitus and field [was] only one modality of action, if the most prevalent one' (1992:131).

³³ It is not my intention to support or challenge Inglis' hypothesis here. I use it only as an example of a Bourdieuan approach in the Irish setting.

³⁴ However, this is certainly not the case universally. The roots of some diasporic dispersals are associated with genocide (e.g. the Armenian or Jewish diaspora).

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY, PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter, I identified the aims of this research and the research questions that have guided it. Principally, this thesis is concerned with identity formation, subjectivity and notions of self. More specifically, it seeks to explore these issues in relation to Irish women religious living in England in order to contribute to what has been written about Irish women's migration, and to add a new dimension to how we think about gender and identity in the context of Irish migration, Irishness and other variables.

In this chapter, I outline the methods used in this research project, the methodological problems and dilemmas encountered along the way and the accommodations that were made to move the research forward. I then explore the process of analysis and interpretation that took place following the collection of data in order to highlight that research goes on long after fieldwork has been completed. Influenced by the burgeoning literature on feminist methodologies, the aim of this chapter is not only to record the method of research but also to reflexively explore my role in the process and production of it. Another key issue examined is the complexity of power in the collection and analysis of qualitative feminist research which has yet to be fully accounted for in the literature. Following a brief discussion of secondary sources not covered in the literature review (because they did not pertain specifically to the areas focused upon), this chapter explores in detail the primary sources used in this thesis: the oral history narratives of twenty-one Irish women religious. A note is also made about convent rule books.

Although the primary method chosen for this research was oral history, I had initially planned to include a statistical analysis of women religious and Irish women religious in England over the course of the twentieth century in order to situate the accounts I sought to collect. My efforts to recover this quantitative information,¹ revealed that it had yet to be recorded in its entirety and to achieve this would have required my contacting and consulting every convent archive in England. This was beyond the means, scope and aims of my research. The fact that this data has not yet been collected provided me with an early indication of the ambiguous position of women religious within the Catholic Church. Secondary sources that helped me to gain a better understanding of religious life included autobiographies by former religious, accounts of religious life and congregational histories by religious themselves and collected narratives of women religious by non-religious.² However, as none of these focused specifically on Irish women religious in England,³ their value was limited.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Oral History

There were a number of ways I might have approached this study. However, given the paucity of relevant data on Irish women religious, especially with regard to the areas I was interested in exploring, I decided that the best way of collecting the information I needed was to talk to women religious and collect their oral history narratives. Coming from a history background,⁴ I was aware of the criticisms made against oral history as a method of research: that it was not 'objective'; that it was vulnerable to bias, omission, distortion

and ambiguity; and that, as a result, its validity was questionable (Roberts, 1995:3). However, as Thompson (1988:101-150) has pointed out, these are problems that could be levied against all methods of historical research. Indeed, by acknowledging these issues more openly, oral history could be seen to advance the way we account for the research we produce.

Thompson also emphasised the importance of oral history, especially as it has developed in Britain, in democratising the study and production of history by admitting the voices of those traditionally excluded from the 'mainstream', including women (1988:8, 64). Certainly, it was the way oral history had been used in this respect that particularly impressed me (Baum et al, 1996; Clancy et al, 1997; Roberts, 1984, 1995). In addition, Portelli (1991, 1997) has shown that what makes oral history different is precisely what makes it so valuable, not only its orality but the fact that it enables us to explore new areas of research, including the *meaning* of events more than the events themselves, as well as the broader issue of subjectivity (see also, Passerini, 1979; Thompson, 1988):

The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning ... But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity (Portelli, 1991:50).

Experiences are central to the construction of self (Scott, 1991) and it is through exploring women's experiences that we might better understand how women occupy the category 'woman' (Skeggs, 1997:27). As identity and subjectivity were precisely the areas I wanted to explore, it seemed clear to me that speaking to Irish women religious would be the best approach to take. Like Skeggs, I do not believe that experience creates or fixes subjectivity or that it can offer some essential or authentic 'truth' about womanhood or the

self, but rather, that it ‘informs our take up and production of [subject] positions’ (Skeggs, 1997:27).

Convinced of the value of oral history as a method and having moved into a gender studies department, I became more influenced by debates within feminist research methodology than historiography and more concerned that my research would accord with feminist principles and practices. Feminist scholars working in social science and other disciplines began in the early 1980s to debate how feminism had already or might usefully affect what they researched, how they researched and the outcome of that research (see, for example, Roberts, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Since then, and with greater acceleration in the 1990s, much has been written about what Harding has shown to be three distinct but interconnected areas of research: method, methodology, and epistemology (Harding, 1987). What connects much of this literature is its suggestion that ‘traditional’ methods of research and accepted theories of ‘knowledge’ can (and should) be challenged by a gender-based focus. Recurrent themes include the ‘how to’ of feminist research (see, for example, Berger, Gluck & Patai, 1991; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995); debates over what constitutes feminist research (Stanley & Wise, 1983); the role of the researcher in collecting and producing knowledge (Berger, Gluck & Patai, 1991; Skeggs, 1995); challenging traditional notions of epistemology (Alcott & Potter, 1993; Skeggs, 1995; Stanley, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1993); and the relationship between academic feminism and the women’s movement (Stanley & Wise, 1993).⁵

Within this body of work, significant space has been given to exploring the method of enquiry which forms the basis of this thesis: oral history (see, for example, Berger, Gluck & Patai, 1991; Clarke *et al*, 2000; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Offen *et al*, 1991, Roberts, 1981; Skeggs, 1995; Stanley, 1990; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Feminists have embraced oral history because it integrates women's lives and experiences (traditionally ignored or obscured) into scholarship, testing reigning definitions of what is 'important' and worthy of study. It puts women's voices at the centre of research, helping shape its agenda, and enables gender to be used as a category of analysis (Sangster, 1994). Because oral history has been so important a method, there has been much debate about how best it might be employed and the ethical and moral dilemmas it raises, most especially with regard to the issue of power within the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Cotterill, 1992).

In a now classic essay Ann Oakley (1981) exhorted feminists interviewing women (feminist or not) to abandon the traditional ('masculine') textbook technique of detachment, which produced a hierarchical relationship between the 'expert' interviewer and her objects of study, and emphasise instead the similarities between women, their 'gender socialisation ...critical life experiences [and] membership of the same minority group', to encourage a non-exploitative relationship, which would in turn benefit the research (Oakley in Roberts, 1981:55). Assuming an empathy or common bond between all women, however, obscures important differences such as class, race, education and so on, and this has led scholars to explore the ethical issue involved in researching 'the other' (see, for example, Olson & Shopes, 1991; Patai, 1991; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996; Wright, 1997). Privileging connections might also create a situation in which

female interviewees are lulled into a false sense of security based on some notion of 'sisterhood' and impart personal information they would not normally reveal (Finch, 1984; Stacey, 1991). Moreover, the interviewer might adapt her subject position (for example, deny knowledge or skills (Gelsthorpe, 1992) in order to claim some kind of commonality, which leaves the way open for more, not less, exploitation (Stacey, 1991).

It was these debates surrounding power dynamics and the potential abuse of power that concerned me before I embarked on my primary research. In the rest of this section, I outline how I went about finding women to talk to me and the practicalities of interviewing. I then return to methodology and give a reflexive account of my experiences in the light of the concerns I had prior to interviewing and which I took with me 'into the field'.

Research Design

The first, perhaps obvious, decision I made was to confine my research to 'active' women religious. Before attempting to make contact with religious, I set out in my research design what it was I wanted to explore in the interviews. There was so much that was not known about women religious that this could have been an endless task. I narrowed my list down to eight topics: 'background'; 'vocation'; 'leaving Ireland'; 'in the congregation'; 'work'; 'the Irish community'; 'assimilation'; and 'time scale or changes over time'. Although I wrote out possible questions appropriate to each section (see appendix one), I wanted the interviews to be less structured than a formal questionnaire. I felt that many of the questions might be answered in the course of discussing life histories

and so this was the approach I took, asking women initially to tell me about themselves and how they came to be an Irish nun living in England. I also felt that this would enable me to let the women's own accounts guide the research.

I initially imagined that if I found one woman in a congregation willing to talk to me, I might be able to organise interviews with other women in the same congregation. However, for comparative purposes, I hoped to interview women from different congregations and, for the same reason, from Irish as well as non-Irish congregations. I also thought it would be interesting to compare the accounts I collected in England with those of religious who had returned to Ireland to live and planned a trip to Ireland for this purpose. Although I could not have known this at the time, notions of 'home' and the position of religious in contemporary Irish society were important themes in the women's accounts, so this proved to be a prophetic gesture. Given the more qualitative and in-depth approach I wanted to take, as well as the time restraints of doing a part-time PhD, I judged that about twenty respondents would be a suitable number to aim for. I hoped to interview the principal respondents (those who were living in England) twice, using the second interview to return to points made in the first interview in more depth or 'fill in' information I felt was needed. Due to restrictions of time and the practicalities of living elsewhere, I planned to interview the women in Ireland only once.

Negotiating Access

The initial concern regarding access was that no religious would be interested in helping me as there had been substantial media coverage of abuse and alleged abuse by women's

religious congregations, especially in Ireland. As I had no contacts amongst women religious, I bought a copy of the *Catholic Directory* and compiled a list of Irish and non-Irish congregations in London, where I lived.⁶ I then took a staggered approach to writing to congregations, in the unlikely event that I would end up with too many respondents at once.

In total and over the course of several months, I wrote (see appendix two) to twenty-one congregations and two individual sisters well known for their work in Irish communities in England. Unanswered letters were followed by 'phone calls, un-retuned calls by further 'phone calls. There were times when I made contact with religious who seemed interested, but were vague when it came to meeting or postponed meeting indefinitely. As a researcher, decisions have to be made about when to 'call it a day' and realise that the 'lead' you have been following will not result in the interview you had hoped for.

Within twelve months of first sending out letters, I had received a positive response from five congregations, secured thirteen respondents in England and conducted twenty-four interviews. The sample was mostly self-selecting: seven of the women responded directly to my letter or 'phone call, three more were co-opted by women already interviewed and a further three were asked by their superiors to take part. Although two of these last three seemed unsure at first about taking part, once I had the opportunity of meeting them and explaining my research to them they became more enthusiastic. Having these women as contacts made finding religious in Ireland who were willing to talk to me much easier and it was only due to time constraints that I limited the number of women I spoke to there to eight. With twenty-one women in total, I was pleased to have reached my target.

It had not been easy to get religious to speak to me and in many cases it was only after I had explained in greater detail what my project was about – either by letter, phone call or in person – and where it would end up that many of the women agreed to be involved. That this was related to the abuse scandals was confirmed by the fact that they were mentioned (directly or indirectly) before or during every interview, even though it had not been a topic I raised. Despite my efforts, no member of an Irish congregation agreed to talk to me, which I felt was also due to the current climate. While I had not exhausted all Irish congregations in London or its surrounding area, I was aware that I could not spend too much time chasing leads that might not materialise⁷ and was very happy with the size and composition of the sample I had managed to collect.

The Sample

All five congregations from which my respondents were drawn were established in the nineteenth century. Three were French but had majority-Irish populations at the time my respondents entered.⁸ One had originated from a French congregation although its sisters had severed ties with the Motherhouse soon after arrival in England. It cultivated strong ties with Ireland (both in terms of financial support and postulants) and was also majority-Irish when the women of this study entered. The fifth congregation was English, with a particularly English middle-class identity. It never had a majority-Irish population. The distinction between the four majority-Irish congregations and the English congregation proved to be an important one and is maintained to some extent in the chapters that follow.⁹

For ease of readability (and to give some semblance of character), I decided to give the congregations pseudonyms.¹⁰ The English congregation became ‘The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Mildred’; the four majority-Irish congregations became ‘The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Louise’, ‘St. Nadine’, ‘St. Cecile’ and ‘St. Marie’.¹¹ More details about the congregations are given in appendix three. The women came from various backgrounds, were aged between forty-nine and eighty-six, had followed diverse career paths, had very individual experiences and expressed very different opinions on religious life. More details about the women are given in appendix four.

The Interviews

The interviews (thirty-six in total) took place over fifteen months. As planned, the women living in England were interviewed twice, although two of them were interviewed three times. This was because, in both cases, the women still had something they wanted to say following a second interview that had lasted over an hour and we decided to meet a third time, rather than continue. The women living in Ireland were interviewed once. The thirteen women living in England were asked at the end of the first interview if they would agree to meet a second time, something which had been intimated in a prior letter/’phone call. All readily agreed.

The interviews, almost fifty hours in total, were taped using a small dictaphone and then transcribed verbatim by myself, using my own system of pauses and breaks, and recording non-verbalisms from my notes or memory where possible. Transcribing was difficult and

time consuming but I enjoyed trying to translate the spoken word into text and it gave me the opportunity to become more familiar with the interviews. The interviews were conducted at a place most convenient for the women – usually where they lived or worked, although in one case in a city-centre café. They generally lasted between one and one and a half hours, although a few lasted two hours. I found that the ideal length was less than ninety minutes. Both interviewing and being interviewed requires a great deal of concentration and I found it was difficult for both of us to maintain this after a certain period. Moreover, I wanted the interviewing to be an enjoyable, not gruelling, experience. There was always time before and after the interviews for a chat, often about my research, and to give the women time to ask me any questions they might have. One of the most popular ones was how (‘in God’s name’) I had become interested in nuns. The women were very generous with their time and very hospitable too. I would hate to tally the number of biscuits and slices of cake I consumed during this fifteen months! Some of the women also offered lunch or dinner and in the case of the women living outside London, room and board.

I tried to follow my research design as much as possible in the interviews, attempting to engender a sense of informal and friendly discussion rather than quick-fire Q&A, and tried to formulate questions to tie in with what the women had already said. This was not only in the name of feminist research (Summerfield, 1998) but because it was a format I was more comfortable with myself. Unlike Minister (1991:28-9), I was under no illusion that it would create a situation in which my respondents would ‘forget’ the dictaphone on the table or the fact that they were talking to a complete or relative stranger, but I would genuinely have found it difficult to remain po-faced for so long. Moreover, most of the

women I spoke to were very friendly and giving in return. Despite the tensions and dilemmas that I explore in the next section, and with the advantage of hind-sight (including the ability to re-listen to the tapes), for the most part the interviews flowed with ease and there were rarely awkward moments. I had hoped the interviews would be enjoyable and a number of the women commented when they ended that they had enjoyed taking part – often just for the opportunity to have a chat about things that would not normally have come up in conversation. A few remarked that they had wanted to take part in an effort to ‘put the record straight’ about religious.

This is not to suggest, however, that the interviews were similar. The women themselves were very different from one another and I learned that an approach which suited one encounter could not be trusted to suit another. Some of the women were shy, especially at first, and needed more prompting while others were very chatty right from the beginning. An example of this is the varied response given to my initial question asking how the women came to be Irish nuns living in England. For example, Lilian answered by telling me the city she was born in, the size of her family and saying that she had decided to enter religious life in her late teens, following a meeting with religious from the St. Marie congregation. She ended by adding:

Basically, that’s my story really. I don’t know if you want to ask me anymore?

It had taken half a minute. By contrast, when asked the same question, Elaine talked for ten minutes without pausing (and only then when I interrupted her to ask her to repeat something she had said which I did not hear). Other women seemed to have something

particular they wanted to say at the outset. For example, Catherine stated in her first sentence that she had ‘hated’ nuns when she was younger and never wanted to be one.

I found also that some of the women were uncomfortable (or perhaps unaccustomed to) talking about their feelings. Bernadette, when asked how she felt leaving Ireland answered ‘we got out in Holyhead ...’ and proceeded to detail her journey from Holyhead to London, including the refreshments she had consumed along the way. I had to find different ways of returning to the same question before she finally began to talk about how she *felt*. A common remark from ‘ordinary’ people taking part in oral history (especially women) is that they have nothing interesting or relevant to say and it was no exception with my respondents. However, a further challenge for my research was that the structure of religious life in the pre-Vatican II period was specifically designed to train religious *not* to think or talk about themselves and this was made clear in the rule books. Indeed, a chance discovery brought home the extent of this. As is the case with many rule books, *The Directory of the Religious of the Congregation De Notre-Dame de Sion* (1946) had a section detailing the correct behaviour religious were to follow with seculars and warned of the possible ‘scandal’ of talking about oneself. In the margin beside this section and in the same pencil script used to write amendments to the rule book (suggesting it was the hand of whomever religious used the book) was written ‘try never to bring yourself into your conversations’. Given the purpose and design of pre-Vatican II religious life, I felt that some women’s comments to the effect that they had nothing interesting to say were particularly salient and it became something I had to work around on occasion.

Following the interviews, I sent each woman a card to thank her for her help with my name, 'phone number, home and University address written inside, in case she wanted to contact me. I told her I would be in touch again when I had written up my thesis and that I would give each of the five congregations a copy of the finished product. I had decided not to offer the women their transcripts to read and none of them asked to see them. Skeggs (1995, 1997) has recorded the disagreements some of the women she interviewed had with the transcripts she made. I knew from the experience of transcribing my own contributions to the interviews that there were many times I wanted to 'erase' what I had said – irrelevant remarks, for example, or comments that did not make sense. The spoken word is very different to the written word (the difficulty of transcribing is testimony to this) but read back in the written form, speech can often seem lacking or 'wrong' and I did not want the women to feel the need to 'correct' themselves out of a desire to present a more coherent account.

As mentioned, one of the issues that concerned me before I began field work was power and the ethical issues surrounding my position as a researcher. I was concerned not to abuse or take advantage of that position, especially by over-emphasising the commonalties between myself and my respondents, of which there were several. What I knew before the interviews, or found out early on in them, was that we had all been born and grew up in Ireland, raised Catholic and had experienced living in England as (white) Irish women – and it was these things precisely that I wanted to talk to the women about. I, however, was no longer a practising Catholic and, at the time, this seemed to me to represent a possible site of exploitation: if I allowed the women to believe I was a practising Catholic, would they say things to me they would not otherwise have said? On the other hand, I

could not find any reasonable connection between my lapsed Catholicism and my desire to research the lives of Irish women religious, so it was not something I wanted to state categorically before the interviews began. Instead, I decided to be as clear on this point as I could when the matter arose. This involved being openly unfamiliar with certain aspects of Catholicism and the religious calendar, although it would have been easy for me to feign such knowledge; not visiting chapel or attending mass when it was offered to me; and, on one occasion, (although I was embarrassed to do so) correcting a woman when she mentioned that she had spoken to my 'husband' on the 'phone, telling her that he was in fact my boyfriend whom I lived with.

I was never asked directly if I was a Catholic, although I often felt that subtle strategies were adopted to find this out – for instance, the invitations to chapel and mass. Looking back, I'm not sure if this was to try and find out more information about me (especially given the exposés on religious life in the media) or a common gesture for people visiting convents. There was no perceptible change in the interviews once it became known that I was not a practising Catholic and it's mere conjecture for me to guess if it was something that was important to the women or not. I mention it here, however, because it was important to me at the time (indeed shaped my approach) and illustrates a presumption I made about the interviews: that as researcher, I would be the one in control, in a position of power and able to exploit the situation to my own ends. In fact, my experience did not bear this out.

The truth of the matter was that I did not *feel* powerful (which is not to say that I was without power – an important distinction) and, in fact, often felt entirely unconvincing as a

‘professional researcher’. This manifested itself in different ways but a common feeling I had was that I looked too young to ‘cut it’ as a researcher and that my manner was more in keeping with a school project than a Ph.D. I had just turned twenty-five when the interviews began and was much younger than the women I interviewed, who were old enough to be my mother, if not my grandmother.¹²

More significantly, however, the women I interviewed were nuns. My personal knowledge of religious prior to the interviews was limited to my convent education, when religious had been in positions of authority over me. Perhaps I assumed the situation would simply reverse itself. Instead, I often felt parallels with the school encounter. This was especially the case interviewing women in full habit who were former teachers or head-teachers and who had an authoritative (and, to my mind, formidable) manner. An edited quote from my interview diary bears this out:

My first interview with [X] ...I felt like a school girl. Although I know this cannot have been the case, when I remember the interview in my head, I see myself sitting there in my blue [school] uniform. The only responses I can muster are ‘yes, sister’, ‘no, sister’. What must she think of me?

Although this was only the most extreme example, as a novice researcher I was often nervous and, in some cases, intimidated. Ensconced in the British Library, designing my research, I was a feminist researcher endeavouring to keep my power under control, but things could feel very different in the interviews themselves. An open-ended, non-hierarchical approach could seem under-prepared and unprofessional and I worried that my friendly demeanour was interpreted as giddy and childish. As suggested in the quote from my interview diary, I was very concerned about what these women thought of me and the kind of researcher I was presenting myself as.

Mostly, my sense of powerlessness stemmed from something I could recognise as my own ‘baggage’, augmented perhaps by the women’s manner. Sometimes, however, it came quite out of the blue. Although I suspected class to be an important theme of my research, I did not think it would be an issue in the interviewing process itself. I come from a middle-class, suburban, Dublin background. The women I interviewed were middle class by birth or had become so through educational qualification, if not congregational affiliation.¹³ However, in one of the interviews I conducted in Dublin, class came to the fore in an unexpected way. The very well-spoken woman I was interviewing, herself a member of an upper-middle class congregation and representative of this, was talking about the changes that had occurred in Ireland over time. She suggested that class consciousness was not so apparent or important as it once was and used something I had done to make this point. Before the interview, she had asked me if I would like ‘tea or coffee, cup or mug’ and I had taken tea in a mug. Drawing on this she said, ‘you see in my day, a lady would *never* have drunk out of a mug’. Compounding this situation was the fact that I had grown up near to where she now lived, but quite obviously not in the same affluent area and had (as she was aware) not attended the expensive fee-paying school which was attached to the convent we were sitting in. Although I did not suddenly develop an anxiety about my class position, I did become conscious of her articulate manner and worried that my way of speaking did not match her standard. This incident became another example of the cognisant feeling that I was interviewing ‘up’, not only by age but status. Experiences of these *reverse* power relations were notably absent from the ‘warts and all’ accounts in the feminist methodologies literature I had read.¹⁴

My feelings of nervousness, powerlessness and, in some cases, intimidation, did not, however, adversely affect the interviews themselves and I was able to recognise very quickly the rich body of material that was being gathered. It was later, however, when I began the process of analysing the interviews in more depth and became more familiar with them, that I was able to recognise a greater level of complexity surrounding the issue of power. Before the interviews, I had presumed that I would be the 'powerful' one. In the interviews themselves, I felt the opposite – 'powerless' in the face of these older, more experienced women, who were nuns. In the process of analysis, however, I realised that the power dynamics were more complex than either of these readings suggested and I began to notice things not apparent to me during the interviews themselves or in an initial reading of them.¹⁵

For example, initially, I did not dwell too much on the common tendency for the women to ask if they were 'doing okay?' or 'saying the right thing?'. These comments were often made while I was switching tape and therefore, not, apparently, committed to record.¹⁶ A few women would stop mid-flow to ask if I wanted them 'to go on' (i.e. continue with their train of thought) or if I was 'interested in this bit?'. I began to recognise that through these comments, the women were seeking some kind of endorsement from me.

The significance of my own educational background was another issue that I began to recognise only at this stage. During the course of our interviews, one of the women mentioned several times, in a tangibly self-deprecating manner, that she had '*only* done a catering course' and '*only* worked in kitchens' (my emphasis). Another woman was quite scathing of modern nurses being required to have degrees (deemed 'fancy'). In neither of

these cases had I considered that our interviews began with a chat about my background which included a primary and master's degree. Clearly, my gender studies background had not gone unnoticed either – a couple of the women implied that I might find them too old-fashioned or set in their ways to be of interest. Comments such as these, recognised only later, illustrated the anxieties some of the women felt and, on reflection, served to challenge my 'powerless' position.

Something else I noticed was that some of the women appeared to be nervous or distant (initially at least) in the second interview. Originally, I had put this down to factors that the women drew attention to – they were tired, had been quite busy recently or, in the case of one woman, felt 'a cold coming on'. However, I later thought otherwise. For me, the first interview was more of a 'performance' than the second: it was then I had to make a good impression and secure another interview. I also felt that once the women had experienced the first interview, they would know that I was not planning to ask any probing or controversial questions and we could *both* relax a little bit as a result. For the women, however, the prospect of the second interview was perhaps a little more daunting because it involved meeting me again and being questioned about the first interview and the representation they had given of themselves in it.

Interviews, for both the interviewer and the interviewee, involve a presentation of self. As Summerfield noted of her experiences collecting oral history:

Just as we were, inevitably, actively constructing identities for ourselves in conducting each interview, so too our interviewees were devising appropriate performances in their meetings with us (Summerfield, 1998:22)

These constructions can only ever be 'partial' (Clifford cited by Stacey, 1991:16), given the limited time in interviews and the fact that they tend to focus on particular topics. Questions (and anxieties) then arise about the account we have given of ourselves, how accurate it is and, perhaps most importantly, if it is one we feel comfortable with.¹⁷ The difference between myself and my respondents when we met for our second interview was that we were meeting again following a time-lapse during which I had committed their words and presented subjectivities to paper, read through them, become more familiar with them and had composed further questions in response. By contrast, the women would have had only a memory of me and things could seem a little unbalanced.

Three women were actually hostile towards me when we met for our second interview. The only respondents to live outside London, they lived together in a large retirement home run for and by their congregation. Although welcomed (literally) with open arms on my first visit, the reception when I returned four months later was palpably less convivial. The pre-interview 'chats' were noticeably less comfortable and in each, the women asked the same questions of me including what, if any, conclusions I had come to with my research, what likely chapter headings there would be and where, ultimately, my research was likely to end up. The impression I got was that the women had talked to each other, perhaps others, and had had second thoughts or received negative feedback and begun to suspect my intentions as a result.¹⁸ Perhaps they thought that the first interview, especially given the 'mundane' areas we had discussed, was merely to 'soften them up', and that I planned to explore more personal or controversial topics during our second meeting. As it happened, each of the women gradually relaxed into the interview and I

was very pleased with the result, although it proved to be an exhausting experience defusing their hostility.¹⁹

Although in this last example the situation was clear to me at the time, it was during the longer process of analysis that took place after the interviews had finished that I was able to contextualise my experiences in terms of power within the interviewee-interviewer relationship. Partly, this was due to my growing confidence. Also, however, it came from not having to worry so much about how I was presenting myself, letting go of those worries and being able to focus more on what the women had said in greater depth – what Anderson & Jack (1991) have called ‘Learning to Listen’. That is, listening not just to what you expect to hear but to what is actually being said or, indeed, communicated (which is not always the same thing). It was at this point that I could recognise the various forms of power relations that were being produced and the different axes along which they were being produced.

The feelings I had sometimes had in the interviews were clearly distinct from the structural relations of power that pertained in the situation itself. In retrospect, I realised that both myself and my respondents slipped in and out of various subjectivities (for example, me from feminist researcher to intimidated novice, them from professional experienced religious to interview subject) and there were ways in which we were both empowered and dis-empowered as a result. It seemed also that power was not often recognisable to those ‘exerting’ or invested with it: my own sense of ‘powerlessness’ was not necessarily related to the women I was interviewing feeling or exerting power over me and vice versa. The further into analysis I moved, the more I began to recognise how

convoluted the whole encounter was and the less comfortable I felt even describing the relations in terms of ‘power’, which, in its dictionary definition at least (‘the skill, physical ability, opportunity or authority to do something’ Chambers, 1998) suggests something that is consciously felt. This led me to think about the important distinction to be made between the power *to* (skill/capacity) and the power *over* (domination), and the ways in which power *to* might generally be consciously felt while power *over* may not be – or, indeed, ‘owned’.²⁰

Convent Rule Books

In addition to interviewing, and because they were frequently mentioned by the women, I also consulted convent rule books. In order to be approved by Rome, religious congregations were required to have a written constitution which outlined not only the internal structure of the congregation, the work it was set up to do (its ‘charism’) and the dress or habit which would distinguish its members from others but also, often in the greatest detail, how its members should behave, think and act. Known as ‘the rule’, these books instructed women religious on every aspect of their day including work, prayer, appearance and deportment and were literally a blue-print for religious life.²¹ The pre-Vatican II rule books I consulted had between fifteen and forty-nine chapters, with as many as 416 specific directions to be followed. Although congregations continue to have written constitutions, many congregations have replaced (over time) their ‘rule’ with a more liberal, relaxed and flexible ‘guide’ to religious life.

The frequent references the women made to ‘the rule’ was testimony of its significance and alerted me to their potential value in helping me to better understand the pre-Vatican II period. Although not easy to get hold of, between the small number of rule books in the British Library,²² a much larger collection held in the Dublin Diocesan Archives and some of the women generously lending me copies of their own (or borrowing them for me),²³ I managed to gather pre-Vatican II rule books of the five congregations I spoke to as well as modern day equivalents for three congregations. In addition, I consulted several other rule books for comparison, as well as a ‘directory’ for a male religious organisation.

Aside from being a fascinating read, the rule books were invaluable for contextualising the women’s experiences, providing information about the pre-Vatican II period not available elsewhere, and illustrated the significance of Vatican II which was such an important theme in the women’s accounts. More than this, however, a textual analysis enabled me to explore what the books said about the Church’s attitude to women and ideologies surrounding womanhood and religious life that the women had tried to conform to, negotiate or fight against in forming and articulating their sense of self. In another respect, the rule books embodied the attraction of religious life – often they were beautiful leather-bound books, one of the few possessions religious could have in the pre-Vatican II period, which in their formal language spoke of the perfection of religious life and the purity and significance of those called to it.

ANALYSIS

The collection of data is only one stage in the research process. Analysis and interpretation is what makes the thesis, transforming ‘conversational narratives’ (Grele, 1985, in Perks & Thomson, 1998:44) into hypotheses, arguments and, eventually, chapters. I had spent fifteen months interviewing but the process of detailed in-depth analysis, interpretation and writing-up took a further twenty months to complete. In this section, I outline the method or techniques used to approach analysis and the interpretative process that accompanied it.

It seems necessary first to provide a comment on oral history narratives as a source. The women interviewed for this research were asked to reminisce about their whole lives, which amounted to over eighty years for some, no less than five decades for any of them. Issues are necessarily raised about how we remember, what it is we choose to remember and the way we present our memories to others, including the extent to which the intervening period has influenced this process. This raises questions of truth and reliability (Plummer, 1983). Although impossible to judge the relationship between the processes of memory and memory itself, this does not render the accounts, or oral history generally, as useless. Indeed, I am less concerned in this research to uncover some essential truth about the women in particular, or women religious in general, and more concerned to explore subjectivities – themselves neither fixed in time or over it. How and why the women remember certain events might affect the overall story they tell, but it does not render them *untruths*. Oral history retains its value also, moreover, by enabling me to look back into the women’s lives, exploring how they make sense of their own lives

in retrospect. Bearing this in mind, it was also the case that in communicating events or moments from the past, my respondents tended to go to great effort to make sense of their actions and experiences by contextualising them in a time or place I had some purchase on already from other sources or from personal familiarity.

There are several practical difficulties involved in trying to convert forty-eight hours of spoken word into a thesis, and analysis and interpretation involved several stages. The first step was to take each woman's account, read (and re-read) it in isolation of the other accounts and write an essay on what I thought to be the main or most interesting themes to be drawn out. These essays varied in length from three to over sixteen thousand words. I was particularly interested in exploring what subject positions the women had claimed, how these had changed over time, the meanings the women attached to certain things (such as their decision to enter religious life) and how what they said fitted with dominant or submerged discourses of Irishness, religious life and womanhood (none of which I regarded as fixed). I also explored in these essays how I thought my role in the interview had affected what had been said or left unsaid.

The next stage was to draw out recurrent themes from the collection of essays. The themes I chose, which seemed to me the most prominent from the accounts, were religious, gendered, class and ethnic identities.²⁴ In each case, I was looking not only for connections between the women but contradictions between them, and within a single account. Having decided on these themes, I returned to the interviews and, using coloured pencils, went through each line of the transcripts, manually indexing them by underlining quotes appropriate to each one. I approached the interviews together, going through each

one according to a specific theme, so that I could focus on one theme at a time (of course, by the end, several sentences were coloured with more than one pencil). The procedure at times reminded me of an archaeologist's work, going through the accounts layer by layer.

By the time I began to write up, I was using several texts: not only the transcripts themselves, reconfigured by my colour-coded indexing system, but the essays I had written, as well as my interviewing diary (with recourse also to the tapes themselves, of course). Throughout the process of analysis, I became more and more familiar with the interviews and, it felt, the women themselves. Ironically, however, the process was also about putting *my* ideas and *my* subjectivity to the fore more: I decided upon the themes to focus on in detail and it was my notes about the interviews that I was drawing upon.

Certain difficult decisions had to be made concerning what quotes to use and when, and also how to reproduce the women's words. I had more quotes than I could ever hope to use, and it was very difficult having to leave so many out. Often, the decision was based on how many quotes from one individual had already been used, so as to reflect the whole sample. More difficult was the question of reproducing the women's words. Due to word length, and to make my research more readable, I had to cut quotes, often to the bare minimum.²⁵ My worry was that this would suggest less hesitation and more fluency than was the case in the interviews, and perhaps obscure the complicated processes of identity formation that was occurring. However, I have tried to highlight this in other ways throughout the chapters that follow by drawing attention to contradiction and negotiation as essential and recurrent elements in processes of identity.

Another difficult issue was the tendency some women had to backtrack from opinions they had originally expressed.²⁶ While I feel that gender may be an important element in this (not wanting to claim ‘strong’ or controversial opinions of their own, either as women or religious), I interpreted these tendencies in terms of seeing the interviews as performances with attendant concerns about the representation of self. For this reason, I did not discount the original opinions (although I acknowledged backtracking when it occurred).

My life-histories approach to interviewing and technique for analysis informs the structure of the thesis as a whole. Most of the oral history-based chapters follow a chronological route, which begins with the women’s experiences of growing up and highlights the importance of Vatican II in their lives. As their titles suggest, these chapters reflect the themes I drew from the women’s accounts. Without suggesting that identities are lived in isolation, the strategy I adopted to organise the material I gathered was to separate individual identities from one another, before bringing them back together in chapter eight under the theme of migration.

Interpretation involved a dialogue between myself and the interview narratives that I had helped create (Summerfield, 1998). Transcribing, summarising, indexing and writing up was a process by which the women’s accounts were transformed from spoken word into *my* research thesis. I had made the decision early on that I would not engage with the women over the transcripts or my interpretation of them. I am sure that the women’s further involvement would have produced a very different piece of research to this one. As it stands, the interpretation is my own and I take full responsibility for it. There is no

suggestion that this thesis represents the ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ voice of Irish women religious or even the women religious who took part in this project. More accurately, it is my interpretation of the partial accounts given by them, which I helped produce.

However, this is not to say that the women have not influenced how I interpreted their accounts – as Skeggs has said ‘their knowledge enabled my knowledge [and] I was constantly learning from them’ (1997:30). Nor is it to suggest that I regarded them as research ‘objects’. Indeed, their subjectivity is something that I try to highlight throughout the chapters that follow. However, if their subjectivities (or my interpretation of them) form the basis of what follows, then I need to account for my subjectivity also (Skeggs, 1997:18). My own position and location has affected every stage of the research process, from the research questions, through interviewing and analysis to the final product. I have already described my material background as Irish, middle-class and Catholic. To this I could add the experiences of being an Irish woman in Britain. My intellectual biography is informed by feminism and feminist explorations of subjectivity and identity. The desire to research was rooted in wanting to contribute to the still under-theorised and incomplete area of Irish women’s migration, to explore areas not examined in this literature and to talk to women previously ignored by it. These are the points of my material and intellectual biography that I can name, although I’m sure there are many other relevant factors that are invisible to me.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have sought to give some insight into my experience of designing, collecting and analysing an oral history project and the genesis of that research. Skeggs (1997:17) has written that a reflexive account can still only be partial ‘because it would be impossible to reduce into text and convey completely the research encounter’ and in this, as in other chapters, I have had to decide what to include and what to leave out. Focussing on dilemmas has reflected part of my experiences but not the whole, and I am concerned that much of the enjoyment, fun and genuine fascination I experienced are not sufficiently recorded. For this, my word will have to suffice.

This chapter has outlined my experiences of collecting oral histories from twenty-one Irish women religious. In defining the various stages of my approach and examining them in turn, I have tried to show that research and analysis are on-going processes which overlap one another. One of the main themes explored has been the complicated issue of power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship and even here, I have suggested that perceptions and evaluations can change over time. Research is always in flux, a process of ‘becoming’. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted my role in the process and production of the research. The decision to use pseudonyms was an illustration of this: although partly to protect the women’s identity, I choose to use pseudonyms also to protect the women from my mediation (Summerfield, 1998:26). Having described my methodology and experiences of research, in the following chapter I move to contextualise the women’s oral history narratives, providing background information on the societies in which they grew up and into which they moved.

¹ My attempts to collect quantitative information on religious included contacting several Catholic organisations in England, the Apostolic Nunciature in Rome, individuals I had heard were researching the history of religious congregations in England, and the five archdioceses of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. While the number of religious in England and Wales at a particular moment might be gleaned from a single study or account (e.g. Desmond, 1982) such references do not give figures across a period. Nor is the proportion of Irish sisters given. Unlike its Irish equivalent, *The Catholic Directory for England and Wales* does not give statistical information on women religious, only male religious. Although a couple of the dioceses were able to help by providing figures of the number of women religion in their dioceses for random years, the information gathered was incomplete and therefore, of very limited use.

² Of which there are several. See, for example, Armstrong, 1997; Baldwin, 1949; Bernstein, 1976; Clarke, 1995; DeRossa, 1988; Holm, 1994; Hulme, 1977; Loudon, 1992; McHale, 1980; McGrath, 1990. More analytical studies exploring the attraction and survival of religious life, as well as its future, include Cambell-Jones (1979) and Wittberg, (1994). As its title would suggest, Moorhouse (*Against All Reason*, 1986), takes a less than positive view of women entering religious congregations.

³ As noted in chapter 2, Sarah Clarke is an Irish religious living in Britain although her book deals specifically with her work for Irish prisoners in British gaols.

⁴ My first degree was in History and Politics and I have an MA in Women's History.

⁵ The examples given here are not exclusive to the category I have assigned them and many cover more than one area. For edited collections covering a broad range of issues, see also Hesse-Biber *et al*, 1999; Holland & Blair, 1995; Oakley, 2000; Reinhartz, 1992. As Lentin noted in 1993, there has been little contribution to this literature from an Irish perspective, although this is beginning to be addressed (see Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Clancy *et al*, 2000; Good, 1998).

⁶ I also used directories of religious congregations and other sources to find out more about the congregations I approached (Anson, 1949; Battersby, 1950; Cruse, 1950; Murphy, 1876; Steele, 1901).

⁷ The time lapse between sending letters and organising an interview took anything between two and six months, but usually over four months. This was due to the time it took to make follow up calls, give more information on my research, allow the women to make up their mind about talking to me and arranging a convenient time to meet. Although many of the women I interviewed were 'retired', they usually had full-time commitments to their congregation or elsewhere.

⁸ As I had been refused access to the archives of more than one of the five congregations, I was unable to gather accurate statistical information concerning the ethnic compositions of the congregations in my sample. These descriptions are based on the women's accounts.

⁹ The distinction is made by referring to the majority-Irish congregations as 'the Majority Irish-congregations', the remaining congregation as 'the English congregation'. This is not to suggest, however, that the majority-Irish congregations formed one homogeneous group. There were many other important differences that cross-cut the five congregations: for example, the extent to which they were 'traditional' or had modernised.

¹⁰ The women were also given pseudonyms, as were certain place names mentioned by them.

¹¹ These names are entirely contrived, bearing no reference to the actual name of the congregation they represent. There is a huge number of women's religious congregations in existence and any resemblance to actual congregations is accidental.

¹² I had guessed that the women would be older than me and had prepared for this by reading oral history accounts that explored the specificity of interviewing older respondents (see, for example, Dunaway, 1992; Perks and Thomson, 1998; Thompson, 1988). While some of my respondents were mature in age, the effects of ageing on mental capacity turned out not to be significant in the interviews.

¹³ Added to this is the fact that class operates in a more complicated way in Ireland than England, especially throughout the twentieth century. I think I suspected that we would share some kind of group membership on the basis of an Irish, Catholic background.

¹⁴ In recounting her experiences of interviewing older, more experienced women sociologists, sociologist Annmarie Turnbull (2000) explores issues of power and powerlessness in an article published after I had completed my interviews. Also, however, Turnbull was focusing on the experience of interviewing other sociologists – I was not myself a religious interviewing other religious but a former convent girl.

¹⁵ In fact, the extent to which opinions about individual interviews or the experience of interviewing overall can change over time is remarkable. Indeed, with the advantage of hindsight and because I no longer see the

women exclusively as nuns (given my growing familiarity with the interviews/women), I now find it difficult to rationalise the concerns I once had about the respondents finding out about my lapsed Catholicism. On a less positive note, it seems equally remarkable that I could have so recently thought myself mistakable for a school-girl – a result, perhaps, of the very fast ageing process that accompanies doing a Ph.D.!

¹⁶ I used the journey home to write down as much information as I could possibly remember from the interviews, especially that which would not be recorded on tape, whether it seemed significant at the time or not.

¹⁷ This was especially so when, as was often the case, myself and my respondents ‘lost’ ourselves in the interview. The women sometimes said things they asked me to be sensitive with or not use at all. In these moments (or later), it never occurred to me to disregard their wishes and I would never have broken their confidence, but nor did it occur to me at the time that we had crossed a line – if this was something ‘private’, why were they telling me? And if the purpose of my visit was to collect information to use in my thesis, why did I not stop them from revealing this information to me? The fact was that I was equally lost in the moment of listening as they were of telling, which illustrates the ambiguity (and humanness) of the interview experience

¹⁸ Perhaps their worries were not unfounded. One ‘horror story’ I had come across myself was of a researcher accessing the archives of a religious congregation and using photographic and film material of the congregation in a television exposé of sexual abuse alleged to have taken place in a completely different religious order.

¹⁹ So tiring was this experience that after conducting two interviews it was all I could do to stay awake for dinner and I had to refuse the offer of watching television afterwards. This was in a retirement home and many of the women were very old, but aged twenty-six I was the first in bed at 8.30 p.m.!

²⁰ This reflexive account represents my own attempts to ‘own’ or recognise the ‘power’ that the women might have associated with me: as a researcher, as younger, as someone with letters after their name etc.

²¹ Although each rule book was particular to its own congregation, they generally followed a set pattern based on the writings of either St. Augustine (AD 354-430) or St. Ignatius (AD 1491-1556) (Armstrong, 1979; Beattie, 1945; Cotel, 1926; Lawless, 1987).

²² In fact, the volumes in the British Library are not held in a collection and finding them involves imaginative use of the catalogue system.

²³ In the case of one woman, ‘smuggling’ me out a copy because it was against convent protocol for seculars to see them.

²⁴ Due to word limit, I later decided not to have a distinct chapter on class but to interweave this material into the other analytical chapters.

²⁵ In the following example, the first excerpt is what Elaine actually said, the second as it appears in Chapter 6:

‘But now I would see that, you know, that, you wouldn’t like, now, you sort of, can talk to each other and can, sort of, pass remarks. I wouldn’t, I would feel now that talk about, like the Irish em, the IRA or things like that, you know, it’s, I would feel that the English nuns are, kind of, get very upset about the, the way they have behaved and eh, eh, you always felt that we were all, sort of, because we’re Irish, we’re in some way responsible. We’re getting a little bit of that: you’re Irish and therefore the, the IRA have done this so you’re responsible for it, that kind of thing. And you do feel bad about it. And you would feel that they notice it. They make you feel bad for it. A little bit, but not much, you know, you wouldn’t, it’s a, sort of, a sub, a conversation you wouldn’t feel happy talking about. When you come in and there’s a bomb, and you can talk at breakfast and somebody’s been bombed by the IRA. You know, you just feel bad about it, you feel bad about it and, you see, as you say, most of us are, you see, they have only three or four Irish nuns here out of twenty-five. And we’re living in that kind of society and em, things like that do come up your way. And you feel that they are very English. And we are very Irish’ (250 words)

Becomes:

‘But now [in the wake of Vatican II, we] can talk to each other and ...I would feel that the English nuns ...get very upset about the [activities of the IRA and] because we’re Irish, we’re [made to feel] in some way responsible ...And you feel that they are very English. And we are very Irish.’ (65 words)

²⁶ An example of this was the woman who talked a great deal about consciously feeling Irish in an English congregation, only to remark at the end of the interview that it was not something she felt was important. This is not the same as someone changing their mind during the course of a single sentence when it is

realised that what they have thought to be the case might not be. For example, when asked if the school she worked in had a particularly 'Irish' feel to it, Kate replied 'Oh, yes, definitely'. However, when she tried to expand on this, she was unable to find any particular way in which it was and realised, instead, that she had mistaken Catholicism for Irishness. Upon reflection, she remarked that the school 'wasn't particularly Irish, really, in any way, no'. Kate's U-turn illustrates something that is quite common: the gradual realisation that something you have accepted as being a certain way, might not be. This differs from expressing an opinion and later trying to undermine the significance of the point made.

Chapter 4: THE CONTEXT – LIVING IN IRELAND, VATICAN II AND IRISH MIGRATION TO ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

The women of this study grew up in Ireland between the 1910s and the 1960s; entered religious life and migrated to England between 1930 and 1970; and have lived in England or returned to Ireland since then. What were the societies in which these women have lived like? What issues, events and process have shaped their lives and in what ways were they gendered? This chapter begins by examining the Irish society in which the women were born and grew up, focusing particularly on the position of women in Ireland, dominant notions of womanhood and the realities of women's situation. It then moves on to explain Vatican II and the impact it has had on the lives of women religious.

The final section offers background information on Irish migration to England and explores the position of Irish people, and Irish women, in England with respect to historical constructions of Irishness (in and by Britain) as well as non-white immigration since the 1950s. While this chapter cannot examine in great detail the history of either British or Irish society in the twentieth century or the inter-relationship between the two, it does provide an overview in which to contextualise the narratives which form the basis of the chapters to follow.

GROWING UP IN IRELAND, 1910s-1960s

During the period in which the women of this study were born and grew up, the position and status of Ireland changed fundamentally. When the oldest respondent, Bernadette,

was born in 1911, Ireland was still officially part of ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’. Following a rebellion in 1916 and a war of independence against Britain fought between 1919 and 1921, a treaty between the two countries was signed at the end of 1921 which gave partial independence to twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of Ireland. The remaining six counties in the north-east, known as Northern Ireland, remained under British rule. The legal connection between Britain and Ireland was challenged by successive Irish governments and in 1949, one year before the youngest respondent, Josephine, was born, the Irish Free State (as the twenty-six counties were known) became a completely independent republic.

Nationalist Sympathies and Anti-English Sentiment

Of my respondents, only Bernadette, born in 1911, had any living memory of Irish independence. The rest of the women were born either in the heady period between 1918 and 1921 when independence was being fought for or after it had been achieved. They were too young to remember the actual, and violent,¹ transfer of power from one government to another. As will be seen in later chapters, the women were influenced, however, by attitudes towards England² that took hold in the newly post-colonial society when Irish national identity was defined in opposition to its coloniser, as *not* English, if not anti-English (Lambert, 2001:1; Lee, 1989:669).

Catholicism and the Catholic Church in Ireland

Catholicism had played a vital role in the struggle for independence and the construction of a national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. When

independence was achieved, it became one of the most important ways of defining what it meant to be Irish and was equally important as an organising structure in the society that was shaped in the wake of independence (Meaney, 1993; Rossiter, 1993). Catholicism influenced and helped shape not only the spiritual but social, cultural, political and familial forms in place in Irish society. Until recently, it has been regarded as a cornerstone of Irish identity. Numerically, Catholics have dominated the population of Southern Ireland. When independence was achieved, 92.6% of the population were Catholic, rising to 95% in the 1960s (Whyte, 1980:3). In 1991, still over 90% of the population of Ireland were registered as Catholic in census returns (Inglis, 1998:19).

The Regulation of Catholic Devotion

Although commonly referred to by the women of this study as the ‘traditional’ Irish faith, Irish Catholicism is a more recent construction than this term suggests. The religion of the masses, which had been a mix of quasi-pagan, quasi-Christian practices, was formalised and regulated only in the nineteenth century, particularly under a movement known latterly (though still debated by historians) as the ‘devotional revolution’ (Larkin, 1972). It is estimated that in the 1830s, only 30% of Irish Catholics attended mass. By 1895, this had risen to over 90% (Martin, 1997:93). Not distinct from but in addition to formal religious practice, Catholicism also began to be more closely associated in the nineteenth century with an Irish national identity that was in opposition to English Protestantism.

Catholic social teaching was reflected in the legislation of the newly independent state. Whyte gives several examples of legislation introduced following direct consultation or

recommendations from Bishops (1980:263-4) and describes a Catholic moral code as being ‘enshrined in the law of the state’ (1980:24). Examples include censorship laws introduced in the 1920s, the prohibition of divorce in 1925 and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935, which, among other things, made it an offence to import or sell contraception in Ireland.³ Catholic principles were also reflected in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland (Beaumont 1999:101; O’Connor, 1998:63-4) which recognised the ‘special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Catholic Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens’ (quoted in Whyte, 1980:54).

The influence of the Catholic Church was significant, but not total. The Catholic Church was never ‘established’ as the Church of England was in England and confusion even surrounded the juridical meaning of its ‘special position’ (Whyte, 1980:54, 61). The Catholicity of Southern Ireland should be seen not solely in terms of the strength of the Church but as reflecting the religious principles and beliefs of a significant portion of the population and – vitally – those in power. As Whyte argues, it was not just that Ireland was predominantly Catholic but that for much of this period Catholics in Ireland were ‘committed and practising’ (1980:4).

The Catholic Church in Ireland took its (self proclaimed) position as moral guardian of the state very seriously and asserted its right to control social behaviour by instigating or involving itself in initiatives designed to curb what it saw as the increased existence or threat of immorality. Hug suggests that after independence, immorality replaced England as Ireland’s ‘enemy’ and, quoting O’Callaghan, described the Church’s response to this as ‘almost hysterical puritanism’ (Hug, 1999:77). Between the formation of the state and the

1960s, the Church campaigned on several issues and was actively opposed to jazz music and dancing, unregulated dance halls, many published works of literature, foreign films, public courting and styles of dress deemed unsuitable (Donnelly, 2000; O'Dowd, 1987). These campaigns were directed against what the Church considered to be the importation of immoral anti-Christian and foreign life-styles, against which it posited its own specifically Irish model of morality.⁴

Donnelly (2000) argues convincingly that the 'devotional revolution' in Ireland reached its peak between 1930 and 1960, drawing on the Church's hugely successful campaign of Marian worship in this period to support his argument. Indeed, the women of this study grew up in a period of very strong Marian devotion. The worship of the Virgin Mary was neither a twentieth century nor an Irish invention. However, it was seized upon by the Catholic Church in Ireland and had a particularly home-grown feel to it, designed to keep communism and other foreign 'evils' out of Ireland. Organised events included public prayer meetings and processions, some of which were attended by several thousand people, and pilgrimages to Lourdes, Fatima and Knock. In addition, the Church espoused individual and familial prayer to Mary in the form of rosaries and novenas (Donnelly, 2000).

The figure of the Virgin Mary was drawn upon by the Church as a model for Irish women (Donnelly, 2000:280). This contributed to an idealisation of womanhood not connected to sex or sexuality and one that was intimately associated with motherhood (O'Dowd, 1987:13). This idea was not new. Martin (1997:101) has argued that it was central to notions of Irish womanhood in nineteenth-century Ireland.⁵ However, it became more

pertinent in the post-independence period as the Church became increasingly concerned with morality, especially female morality (Donnelly, 2000; Hug, 1999). The Church was particularly worried about the low and late rate of marriage, which meant that young people were spending longer periods of time single, outside the sanctity of marriage and in danger from corrupting behaviour (Donnelly, 2000). The Church was also increasingly concerned about the moral fate of Irish women migrants (Delaney, 2000:201; Ryan, 2001).

A Church-Going People

The Catholic public at large may not have been as vociferous as the Church was in campaigning around issues of morality, but they tended not to publicly question the Church's authority or monopoly over morality either. Of course, there were those who dissented,⁶ but this was generally done in private, hidden away to avoid what could be brutal consequences. Women who contravened sexual norms brought 'a ramifying series of difficulties for herself and her kin [which] would invite exceptionally severe censure from public opinion' (Whyte, 1980:32). Those who became pregnant outside marriage received no welfare, were stigmatised by illegitimacy laws (as were their children) and were often excluded by a judgmental society (Beale, 1987:57-62). Unmarried pregnant women were usually sent away by parents to give birth elsewhere. Publicly, the Irish people had to be seen to be behaving in accordance with the Church's pronouncements.

However, acceptable social practice in Ireland became so not solely because the Church decided that was how it should be, but because society accepted this as well. Moreover,

local communities could prove more effective than legislation at policing themselves, ostracising individuals who were seen to behave in ways contrary to social norms.

Seeds of Change

If, as Donnelly (2000) argues, the 1930s to the 1960s marked the zenith of the devotional revolution in Ireland, it was in the 1960s that the position of the Catholic Church began to alter. Socio-economic and attitudinal changes within Irish society combined with modernisation within the Catholic Church itself to create the conditions by which this could occur. The Catholic Church was changed from within by the Second Vatican Council, which met between 1962 and 1965.⁷ The aims of Vatican II (as it became known) were to identify, modernise and clarify the position of the Catholic Church with respect to the changed and changing realities of the modern world. During the course of its meetings, the Church produced sixteen documents promulgating its position on various issues from ecumenicalism to religious freedom. Significantly, the status of the laity was improved and recommendations were made to the clergy to be more open and less authoritarian with their flock (Abbott, 1965). Vatican II inspired more open and frank discussion within Catholicism in Ireland (Brown, 1981:294) and led to what one of the women in this study, Josephine, described as a 'lighter' attitude to Catholicism.

The other significant development occurred within Irish society. The economic fortunes of independent Ireland, depressed since its inception, began to take a turn in the late 1950s due to policies introduced under the new Lemass government (Lee, 1979, 1989). Ireland experienced record economic growth in the early 1960s, a significant rise in employment

levels, increased urbanisation and consumerism and a reduction in the numbers of those leaving. In the late 1960s, and for the first time, Ireland became a predominantly urban, rather than rural, country (Brown, 1981:258). Social changes accompanied economic change and one of the great catalysts for this was television – bringing issues previously confined to the domestic and private sphere into the open, including marital relations and (hetero-)sexuality (Beale, 1987; Lee, 1989). In contrast with earlier periods, there was a marked increase in the marriage rate (20% between 1966 and 1970 (Brown, 1981:259)) while the fertility rate, previously the highest in Europe (Daly, 1997b:116), declined by one-third in the 1960s (Brown, 1981:260).

These demographic changes reflected changing attitudes amongst Irish Catholics. More and more women were choosing to use contraception (Keogh 1994:267; Whyte, 1980:403).⁸ In fact, and related to the changes within Catholicism itself, the 1960s was the first decade in which a significant number of Irish Catholics began to openly question the authority of the Church, especially in matters considered private, and to make decisions about personal morality that were at odds with the teachings of the Church (Whyte, 1979, 1980). As Brown describes, religion was becoming less an ‘all embracing reality within which life must be ordered and an immutable aspect of Irish national identity [and more] a personal expression of individual communities and values’ (1981:302).

These changing attitudes, especially in the 1960s, should not be exaggerated. The Catholic population remained more publicly devout than in other Western European countries and the Church continued to hold a position of strength in Irish society,

especially with respect to education and health. However, there was a perceptible adjustment in the position of the Church and, of significance for my study, this was reflected in attitudes towards religious life. The next section explores the position of women in Ireland over the period and the models of womanhood available to women, including religious life.

Women and Irish Society

It would be impossible to précis 'the' position of women in Ireland either at any one moment or over the period in which the women of this study were born and grew up as this would suggest an homogeneity of experience, aspiration and access to resources which could never exist. However, it is possible to explore dominant ideologies surrounding womanhood, to consider the opportunities that were open to women, the material realities of their lives and key changes which have occurred in the meaning and materiality of womanhood in Ireland over the period. In the first part of this section, I draw attention to the limitations placed upon women after independence, both to claim a public role for themselves and as workers. I also explore the opportunities available for women to marry. I then go on to look at the two principal 'models of womanhood' in Ireland during this period: marriage and motherhood and religious life.

Legislation, Limitation and Opportunity

Despite the role women played in the struggle for independence (Ward, 1989, 1998), their claim to equal citizenship following it was challenged by various pieces of gender-specific legislation which assumed women's primary place within the home and sought to protect

it. Examples of this included the Civil Service Amendments Act (1925), which gave the civil service the power to limit women's access to more senior positions within it, and legislation introduced in 1927 which automatically exempted women from jury service, although they were able to volunteer their services if they so wished. The debates surrounding the jury bills focused on women's 'natural role' and the limited extent to which it was claimed women could be expected to fulfil the obligations of citizenship given their commitments in the home (Valiulis, 1995a, 1995b, 1997).

This is not to say, however, that women were completely denied, or allowed themselves to be denied, any public role whatsoever. In 1922, women over the age of 21 were given the right to vote equally with men – earlier than in most European countries. Although no woman held a ministerial post in either the Free State or the Republic until 1979 (Keogh, 1994:279), women were involved in formal politics as members of both houses of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament) throughout the period and organised themselves politically on various issues including the living conditions of women in Ireland (Beaumont 1997, 1999; Clear, 2000; Connolly, 2002; Cullen & Luddy, 2001).

Legislation was also introduced which limited women's access to paid employment. In addition to the Civil Service Act mentioned above, a married women's employment bar was introduced in 1933 in many industries, including public sector employment, and the 1935 Conditions of Employment Act gave certain industries the right to impose a maximum proportion of women workers or prohibit them entirely if deemed necessary. In 1938, the statutory age of retirement for women was lowered from sixty-five to sixty but remained unchanged for men (Beale, 1987). A 1953 Department of Education memo on

women and public sector teaching stated that ‘the care and direction of a home and the rearing of family constitute a whole-time assignment sufficient to tax the strength and energy of the normal woman’ adding that pregnant teachers would create an ‘unhealthy curiosity’ amongst school children (quoted in Keogh, 1994:281). The suggestion was that marriage and motherhood (and there was no distinction made between the two) were not only physically but morally incompatible with paid employment.

Although schooling was compulsory between the ages of six and fourteen (and provided free of charge), secondary and further education was reserved for those who could afford it. Free, post-primary education was not introduced until 1966 (Brown, 1981:252). While no formal obstacles (except resources) on women entering the professions were in place, research shows that promotion to higher levels was more difficult for women than men (O’Connor, 1997).

Until the 1950s, women who were ‘gainfully employed’ worked predominantly in agriculture or domestic service (Daly, 1981). However, these industries had been in decline since the 1920s. In fact, the number and proportion of women in paid work declined overall between 1926 and 1961 (see appendix five). Although the number and proportion of women employed in some sectors increased, this was not sufficient to absorb the amount of women leaving or choosing not to enter agriculture and domestic service.⁹

Agriculture and domestic service were predominantly low paid and low status jobs so it is not surprising that women were choosing to leave these areas of employment. However,

alternative industries were not being created in which women might be employed. Until the 1960s, Ireland was a predominantly rural society and opportunities for women to take on respectable or acceptable work were limited. Moreover, the policies pursued by successive governments were not geared towards creating jobs for women, although there was a demand for them (Daly, 1997b:113). Already in the 1920s, but increasingly thereafter, women were choosing migration over low-status and under-paid jobs in Ireland.

In contrast to other European states (Beale, 1987), the number and proportion of women ‘engaged in home-duties’ in Ireland – working in the home for no pay, which included being a farmer’s wife – rose between 1926 and 1961 (see appendix six). Clear (2000:15) cautions against assuming this to be the consequence of a monolithic gender ideology which forced women back into the home after independence was achieved. Highlighting that the numerical increase in women ‘engaged in home duties’ was far less dramatic than was their decline in agriculture or domestic service, she argues that women were not, in fact, being *forced* back into the home but *choosing to leave* home-based employment, be that domestic or agricultural (2000:15).

However, it could be argued that equivalent numbers of women were not ‘engaged in home duties’ because this had become a less viable, and in some cases less attractive, option. The shift in farming methods from sub-division of land to impartible inheritance, which occurred in the wake of the Great Famine of the 1840s, meant that farms were usually passed on intact from father to son rather than divided up amongst siblings. Fewer women were inheriting land themselves and there were also fewer men inheriting land,

and fewer eligible bachelors as a result. The lack of alternative employment in Ireland's predominantly rural society led to rising migration amongst 'surplus' men and women. As many farmers were reluctant to pass on their land until late in life, inheriting sons could be middle-aged at least before they took over management of the farm and were in a position to marry. Moreover, with generally only one farmhouse per farm, prospective wives faced sharing their new home with their in-laws (Beale, 1987).

As a consequence of this, Irish marriage rates, until the 1960s, were amongst the lowest in the world while the proportion of those never-married was amongst the highest (Travers, 1995:151). Although in the 1940s there was a surplus of single women relative to single male farmers in rural Ireland, by the 1950s women's migration to urban areas in Ireland and, more often, outside it, had reversed this ratio (Daly, 1997a:206). Ironically, at a time when marriage and motherhood were idealised and enshrined in the Constitution of the state,¹⁰ fewer women in Ireland were actually getting married.

The socio-economic changes of the 1960s increased women's opportunities for work and marriage. Industrialisation and urbanisation created jobs for men, but especially for women. The proportion of women in paid employment increased by 10% in the 1960s, although more significant was women's movement into the newer industries (Walter, 1989b:19) and the fact that more married women were taking up paid employment (Smyth, 1997).

Although women were not literally chased back into the home following independence, complementing ideologies – amongst them Catholic social teaching, nationalist rhetoric

and idealised notions of womanhood¹¹ – combined with the realities of a depressed economy to limit their opportunities outside it for most of the period under review. However, this is not to suggest that opposition did not exist. Women (and some men) challenged constructions of womanhood publicly (Beaumont, 1997; Clear, 2000; Connolly, 2002; Daly, 1997b; Valiulis, all references) and privately, in the form of leaving Ireland (Rossiter, 1993). Marriage and motherhood, was, however, the dominant form of womanhood.¹² It was idealised in society, enshrined in the constitution and was the path followed by most women in Ireland. In the following section, some of the realities of this are explored.

Models of Womanhood: Marriage and Motherhood

Until recently, accepted wisdom suggested that the experience of staying at home for women between the 1930s and the 1960s was chiefly negative, especially for rural women, because of the difficult conditions under which they lived, their low status and the prevalence of patriarchy, both private and public (Walby, 1990).¹³ Clear (2000) offers a more complex picture, showing that there was sympathy for women's position in Ireland amongst various sectors of society (including some male politicians) and attempts, some successful, to improve their situation. While recognising the failure of successive governments and Irish feminists to properly address some of the main issues affecting women (including their health), she challenges the notion that the 'woman of the house' was without status or agency. However, while the existence of patriarchy, public and private, neither negates women's agency nor the existence of matriarchy, being 'engaged in home duties' involved a great deal of very hard work for many women.

By 1946, the majority of urban homes had electricity but few rural ones did – and less than 40% of the population lived in urban areas. The drive for rural electrification, however, was quite successful and by 1956 over 50% of rural homes were connected (Daly, 1997a:207), although many electrical household appliances remained prohibitively expensive (Clear, 2000:151). The success of electrification was not matched by the introduction of piped water. In 1946, 92% of urban homes had piped water and 35% had a fixed bath. By contrast, 91% of rural homes relied on a pump or well for water and only 4% had a fixed bath (Daly, 1997a:207). Only one in five rural homes had any form of toilet and just one in twenty had one indoors (Beale, 1987:21). The situation was slow to improve such that by 1961, just over 12% of rural homes had piped water (Clear, 2000:143). Ten years later, 42% of rural homes were still without running water and 33% without a fixed bath (Daly, 1997a:218). The realities of cooking and cleaning in these conditions, often for large families, would be arduous by modern Western standards, although it should not be taken as read that urban living was necessarily easier. The problems of overcrowding and bad housing for those who lived on low incomes in urban areas could be just as overwhelming, and carrying water was equally onerous whether it was carried up tenement stairs or from a local well (Beale, 1987).

Notwithstanding the recognition given to women as mothers in the Constitution of 1937 (Beaumont, 1987:183; Clear, 1995:181), very little practical support was offered to them in the form of child allowance, health care or home help. In addition, women had very few rights under family law, were not entitled to welfare payments and were in a vulnerable position if their marriage broke down (Beale, 1987:3). Over the period,

however, attempts were made to ease the burden women faced. Non-contributory widows pensions were introduced in 1936, although not for deserted wives until 1976 (Clear, 2000:51-2). Statutory weekly family allowance payable for all children after the second was introduced in 1944, although this was paid to the 'head of the household' – usually a man. In 1952 second children became eligible and in 1963 all children were included (Lee, 1989:280).

Without doubt, the socio-economic advances of the 1960s represented the most positive alteration to women's living conditions in this period. They contributed to greater urbanisation, as well as generating money which could be spent on improving homes or investing in modern conveniences (Beale, 1987:42-50). Some women took on paid employment themselves, using the money they earned to improve their situation.

Of course, the living conditions of women cannot tell us everything about the experience of marriage itself, positive or negative. Nor is it the intention of this chapter to make any claims about this, only to explore some of the practical realities married women faced. Although the living conditions of most women in Ireland did improve over the period (and continued to advance after it), the reality of marriage and motherhood was very difficult for many women, and far removed from the life of the Madonna the Catholic Church idealised.

Models of Womanhood: Religious Life

Arguably the most important model of womanhood outside marriage and motherhood was religious life. Certainly, it was the only other form of womanhood that the Church publicly espoused (Walter, 2001:18), fitting in, as it did, with Catholic ideologies of de-sexualised womanhood. Unlike employment, which was often seen as a precursor to marriage and motherhood, religious life presented an alternative to it. While women were able to amass a degree of (economic, cultural and social) capital through certain kinds of employment, especially teaching and nursing, it was expected that they would give up work upon marriage. Moreover, spinsters had very little status in Irish society (Byrne, 1997).

Active religious congregations as we now know them first appeared in Ireland towards the end of the eighteenth century. Mirroring growth elsewhere in Europe, their number increased substantially in Ireland in the nineteenth century and continued to grow until the end of the 1960s. The number of religious in Ireland rose from 120 in 1800 to 1,500 in 1851, and over 8,000 in 1901 (Fahy, 1987:7). As a proportion of total Catholic religious in Ireland, male and female, women represented 6% in 1800, 38% in 1850 and 71% in 1901 (Magray, 1998:9). In the twentieth century, their number continued to increase (as the population declined) so that by 1967 there were over 19,000 women religious in Ireland (Beale, 1987:173; Anon. 1972). This figure does not take account of the large number of Irish women who entered congregations outside Ireland including non-Irish and missionary congregations, a path followed by many Irish women. The number of

religious in Ireland reached its peak in 1967 and has been in decline since then (Inglis, 1998:213).

During the period in which the women of this study were growing up, women religious were a revered and accepted part of Irish society. They dominated and controlled women's health and education, as well as taking care of the elderly, the insane and the 'fallen'. Religious themselves were a common sight in society and their buildings and institutions were dotted across the villages, towns and cities of Ireland. With the exception of wives and mothers, religious formed the most numerous and identifiable group of women in Ireland. Due to the position and importance of Catholicism in Irish society and the predominance of religious in the provision of education and health (not to mention redemption), religious congregations were intimately associated with the embourgeoisement of Irish society in the nineteenth century, and respectability and class mobility in the twentieth. In census returns, religious were categorised as members of the 'professional classes'. Magray has suggested that religious life was the 'most culturally privileged position women could hold in the nineteenth century' (1998:45). Given the limited opportunities open to women and the continued (indeed, increased) importance of the Church at least in the period up to the 1960s, the same might be said for much of the twentieth century.

The position of religious in Irish society and Irish women's attraction to entering religious life began to decline in the late 1960s. Vocations from women to religious life declined from 1,409 in the year 1966 to 547 in 1975 while over the course of the 1970s there was an overall decline in vocations by 70% (Inglis, 1979:81). The impact of Vatican II on this

is difficult to quantify but it is likely that the most significant factors affecting the declining number of entrants were the socio-economic and attitudinal changes that took place in Irish society from the 1960s. Greater access to work and education increased the opportunities available to women and this had a positive effect on the material reality of marriage and motherhood. Perhaps more significantly, social changes produced a more open and questioning society, including of matters religious, and one in which a more positive expression and awareness of sexuality began to emerge, albeit tentatively (Inglis, 1998:157). Dominant notions of womanhood began to be questioned, challenged and debated more openly. Increasingly and despite the changes of Vatican II, religious life became associated with a form of womanhood considered less appealing and, for many, passive and repressive. Simply put, religious life itself had become less attractive (Whyte, 1980:383), a fact reflected in declining vocations.

In exploring marriage and motherhood and religious life as models of womanhood, the intention has not been to suggest that these were the only models available to women in Ireland. Women, depending on their resources, might stay on in education, become trained and qualified and enter the job market. Denied these opportunities, they might have been able to secure other sorts of work or left Ireland seeking opportunities elsewhere. They could choose to marry or not, although spinsters were stigmatised. It was these two models of womanhood, however, that were idealised by the Catholic Church and within Irish society, and represented the hegemonic notions of womanhood that existed during the period in which the women of this study were growing up.

VATICAN II

One of the greatest changes the women of this study encountered was Vatican II and its aftermath, which occurred within religious life itself but after the women had left Ireland.¹⁴ Although mentioned previously in the context of Irish society, the impact of Vatican II on the lives of religious was enormous and formed a significant theme in the women's narratives.

One of the documents issued by the second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), was aimed specifically at the modernisation and renewal of religious life. In this document, religious congregations were exhorted to adapt themselves to the modern era by maintaining the essentials of religious life but jettisoning rules and rituals deemed archaic, outdated and irrelevant (Abbott, 1965:466-482). The outcome could not be anything but revolutionary, in the long run at least. Congregations had changed little in the one hundred and fifty years prior to Vatican II. Indeed, the notion of change was anathema to the principal of religious as fixed and divine. Religious life was organised by a strictly controlled and regimented adherence to rules and regulations, set out in each congregations' constitutional guide and rule (see chapter three). Such was the importance of the rule that it had become a measure of the faith itself. *Perfectae Caritatis*, in a way perhaps not obvious even to those who wrote it (at least in terms of its potential), specifically asked religious to question, and perhaps alter, the very fundamentals of religious life. What is more, the congregations were to do this themselves in consultation with their members, although any changes made would eventually have to be ratified by Rome.

Changes introduced over time included a more simple habit, many congregations later discarding it altogether, and greater access to scripture and theology. The congregations' charism was reinterpreted which broadened the work of congregations and the opportunities of work for women within them. There was less regulation and control of relations between women in religious life and between them and the secular world, including their families. Alterations in the living arrangements of religious enabled sisters to move out of large convents into smaller communities, often in residential housing. Generally speaking, religious were given greater freedom of expression as the strict hierarchical and authoritarian regime of the pre-Vatican II period began to be challenged.

The changes brought about by Vatican II were not introduced at once although it did send an immediate psychological shock wave through religious life and precipitated a haemorrhage from it (Inglis, 1998, Whyte, 1980). Both women who used the greater freedoms to realise that they did not have a vocation, and those who were unable to come to terms with the changes that were being introduced, left. Although responded to by congregations and individuals differently, religious life altered fundamentally in the wake of Vatican II.

MIGRATION TO AND LIVING IN ENGLAND, 1930s-1990s

The women of this study entered religious life and moved to England between 1931 and 1972, and most have lived there since. In this section, the scale of migration from Ireland to England and the position of Irish people in England over the period will be examined in

order to give the reader a greater sense of what Ryan meant when he said that ‘emigration is at the centre of the Irish experience of being modern’ (1990:45).

Irish Migration

Since the Great Famine (1845-48), large-scale out-migration has been a recurring feature of Irish society and has had a profound effect on the demography of the country, although it was not insignificant beforehand (Delaney 2000:21-2). During the Great Famine and in its aftermath, the population of Ireland declined significantly from 8.2 million in 1841 to 5.4 million in 1871 (see appendix seven). This decline was due to increased mortality and migration. It is estimated that during and immediately after the famine over two million people left Ireland (Ó Gráda, 1993:104-5). Between 1871, when records first began,¹⁵ and 1926, when the first post-independence census was taken, a further 1.8 million left. Throughout this period, the most popular destination was the United States, although a great many Irish migrants also went to Britain (NESC, 1991:58). Out-migration rates peaked during and immediately after the famine, abated to some extent in the 1870s, rose again in the 1880s and maintained a high, if declining, rate from then until independence (see appendix nine). This was the first ‘great wave’ of migration.

The second ‘great wave’, which reached its peak in the 1950s, occurred between the 1930s and the 1960s – almost exactly the period in which the women of this study left Ireland. In contrast to the first wave, the most popular destination of those leaving during the second was Britain, especially England (Delaney, 2000:45). Irish census returns between 1926 and 1971 suggest a net in-out migration figure of 1.14 million overall, although

during the 1950s alone over 400,000 people migrated from Ireland (NESC, 1991:58), most of them to England. This is reflected in census returns for England and Wales which record a marked increase of Irish-born people living in England, especially those from the Republic (see appendix eight).¹⁶

Migration from Ireland declined in the 1960s and in the 1970s net immigration figures were recorded for the first time. Recession in the 1980s, however, once again saw migration levels rise, especially in the latter part of the decade, establishing a third wave (see appendix nine). While the UK remained the most popular destination in the 1980s, a greater proportion of Irish people were also choosing to go elsewhere, including, illegally, to the US.¹⁷ Although the number of Irish-born people in Britain was shown to have declined in the 1991 census (see appendix eight), their number is still considerable. When second- and third- generation estimations are taken into account, the Irish form Britain's largest immigrant group (Hickman & Walter, 1997:19). In the 1990s, migration rates changed once more: declining between 1991-5 and producing net immigration rates since 1996, both of Irish people and foreign nationals. The majority of those returning have come from Britain (Gray, 2000b:183), which illustrates the continued importance of the migrant flow between Britain and Ireland, although its direction has changed.¹⁸

Apart from its scale, one of the most significant features of Irish migration in the modern era is its gendered composition. Between 1871 and 1926, over half of Irish migrants were women. During the second wave, more women than men left in the inter-war period, immediately following the war and in the 1960s (see appendix nine). Fewer women returned to Ireland during the period of immigration in the 1970s, although more men left

in the 1980s (Gray, 2000a:68). Setting Irish migration apart from European patterns, Irish women have left Ireland often in equivalent or greater numbers than men. In addition, for the most part they left not as male appendages but as young single women, their remittances, at least until the earlier part of the twentieth century, often facilitating the migration of other females (Murphy, 1997). Census figures from the immediate post-famine period record more Irish women than men living in Britain (Walter, 2001:119). Since 1921 Irish women have consistently out-numbered their male counterparts (see appendix eight).

The causes of Irish women's migration continue to be debated. In the 1930s and 1940s, women themselves were seen to be the problem. It was judged that their 'female flightiness' gave them fanciful ideas of the splendours that awaited them elsewhere (Lee, 1989:376). The *Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems*, suggested instead that women left Ireland not only for economic but 'psychological' reasons, which included restlessness, dissatisfaction, poor social conditions, dearth of attractive marriage opportunities and frustrations with social or religious aspects of Irish society (1955:303). Kennedy, writing in 1973, argued that the low status of women in rural society had a negative effect on their health and longevity and suggested this as a reason for them leaving (1970:66-85). More recently, Delaney (2000:184) has returned to economics as the prime reasons women leave Ireland.

Whatever opportunities they were seeking, Irish women migrating to Britain during the second wave were a migrant labour force, providing labour in areas from which the indigenous population was turning away. From the late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth

century, the single most important source of employment for Irish women was domestic service, although they were also to be found in factories and other areas of industrialised employment (Walter, 2001). The 1951 census showed a clustering in the professions (chiefly nursing, but also teaching) and personal services (cleaning and cooking). Two-thirds of all Irish women in paid employment were involved in these two areas, although less than one-third of the total British female population was (Walter, 2001:150). The proportion of Irish women working in personal services fell between 1951 and 1971, signifying their movement into white-collar and clerical work, although nursing has retained its importance as a source of employment. Reflecting the better education levels of 1980s migrants, the 1991 census revealed a discontinuity in the working patterns of younger Irish women with a sharp increase in their numbers in managerial and professional employment (Gray, 2000a:68).

The Irish in England

The experience of migration is influenced by the reception of the host society to the migrant group. In this section, the general perception of Irish immigration and the position of Irish people in England between the 1930s and the 1990s is explored. Of course, experiences are themselves cross cut by individual circumstance (including gender, age, class and so on) and, in much the same way that it is impossible to talk about 'the' position of women, it is equally impracticable to talk about 'the' position of Irish migrants in England. However, as before, discourses and legislation can be used to explore dominant notions that shaped what are very different and individual experiences of being Irish in England.

Irish migration to Britain was already a significant part of the relationship between the two countries before independence. The large-scale immigration of Irish people in the nineteenth century had not been received positively. In 1836, the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain* concluded that Irish immigration represented:

...an example of a less civilised population spreading themselves as a kind of substratum, beneath a more civilised community; and without excelling in any branch of industry, obtaining possession of all the lowest departments of manual labour. (cited by Swift, 1990:17).

Increasingly in the nineteenth century, concern was being expressed about living standards and conditions in the urban centres of Britain which coincided with the increase of Irish people moving into them during and in the wake of the Great Famine. As Jackson suggests, a relationship was believed to exist between the two which added weight to the already prevalent assumption that 'the Irish threatened the British way of life, the level of wages and the moral standards of the population' (Jackson, 1963:40). More particularly, the Irish were regarded as a *racialised* other in nineteenth-century Britain, on the basis of their Celtic roots, their Catholicism, their perceived Irish nationalism and, by implication, potential disloyalty to the Crown (Hickman & Walter, 1995; MacLaughlin, 1999; Poovey, 1995; Walter, 1999a). This was made clear in the many representations of Irish men drawn with simian features which appeared in the press (Douglas *et al*, 1998; Swift, 1990).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, migration to Britain slowed to a trickle (Jackson 1963:10) and although still regarded as a 'social problem' the presence of Irish people in Britain was less of an issue in the first thirty years of the twentieth century than

it had been previously. During the inter-war period, relatively little interest was shown in England towards Irish immigration. Fears were raised in Liverpool in the 1930s over the scale of Irish immigration, particularly Catholic, and the effects of this on crime rates and social standards but, although in draft form the 1931 *Royal Commission on Empire Migration* suggested that a restriction of Irish migration should be seriously considered, this recommendation was omitted from the completed report (Delaney, 2000:85-89). Any restriction on Irish migration to Britain was deemed unworkable both prior to 1921, because Ireland was still officially part of the UK, and after it, because it remained within the Commonwealth. The threat of restrictive legislation was, however, used as a bargaining tool by Britain during the 1930 and 1940s as successive Irish governments moved to obtain full Irish independence (Paul, 1997; Delaney, 2000).

During world war two, Britain needed Irish labour for its war effort and recruited directly from there. Delaney describes the reception of Irish people during this period as 'less than harmonious', associated as they were with drunk and disorderly behaviour (2000:139). Summerfield (1984:59), in her research on women's war work, found that some employers were reluctant to employ Irish women. Ireland's neutral stance during the war only increased hostilities between the two states.

In the post-war period, the British state became increasingly concerned with rising immigration, especially from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, and began to investigate the effects of immigration and the possibility of introducing controls. Although Ireland had become a 'foreign' country in 1949, and despite increased Irish migration to Britain, successive British governments decided against regulating the flow

of Irish immigrants. Instead, Irish people were granted a curious form of citizenship in Britain, one that was created for them under the 1949 Ireland Act: Irish people were to be considered neither subject nor alien but Irish citizens with full rights of subjecthood (Paul, 1997:90). Although Britain retained the right to impose restriction on Irish immigration, it was neither recommended by government investigations on the impact of immigration in the 1950s nor was it introduced under legislation designed to control immigration in 1962 (the Commonwealth Immigration Act), 1968 (the Commonwealth Immigration Act) or 1971 (the Immigration Act) (Paul, 1997:90-110). The main reasons advanced by successive governments for this were the practical difficulties involved in policing the border between Ireland and Britain and the value of Irish labour to the re-building of Britain (Delaney, 2000:211).

A less overtly expressed but equally important underlying theme in these debates was race (Delaney, 2000:214). Government reports, while acknowledging that the Irish were an ‘unpredictable and inconsequent people’ (cited by Paul, 1997:108), decided that Irish citizens did not give rise to ‘the same kind of problems or foreboding as the presence ... of similar numbers of coloured people’ (cited by Paul, 1997:108) and that ‘the Irish are not – whether they like it or not – a different race from the ordinary inhabitants of Great Britain’ (cited by Delaney, 2000:209). In response to non-white immigration, the Irish had, officially at least, been racially re-designated. Although deemed of lower stock than the indigenous population, they were no longer considered ‘foreign’, at least in relation to other non-white immigrants. As the ‘problem’ of immigration became increasingly associated with race and colour, the Irish, predominantly white and English-speaking,

became ‘invisible’ in the debates and were assumed to have assimilated into British society.

This official ‘invisibility’, however, did not guarantee acceptance in the wider society and the level of Irish immigration in the 1950s did not go unnoticed (Holmes, 1978, 1988). Hostility continued to be focused around specific issues such as crime, disorderly behaviour and low living standards and was embodied in the ‘no Irish’ signs attached to accommodation and job vacancies throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Curtis, 1987; Lennon *et al*, 1988). A 1967 survey of British attitudes towards Irish immigration found that 22 percent of those polled believed Irish people ‘harmed’ British society, against 16 percent who felt British society benefited from their presence (Delaney, 2000:266).¹⁹ Although regarded as having ‘assimilated’, more recent research illustrates that many Irish people in Britain maintained a strong sense of Irish national identity, often tied to the Catholic Church (Fielding, 1993; Hickman, 1995; Walter, 2001). However, given the level of hostility, this identity was not generally expressed publicly outside Irish communities (Hickman, 1996).

Although Irish migration declined once more in the 1970s, the presence of Irish people already living in England became the cause of concern. In 1973, shortly after the outbreak of ‘the troubles’ in Northern Ireland, the reformed Irish Republican Army (IRA) embarked on a military campaign in England which lasted until 1994 and contributed to heightened anti-Irish feeling. In 1974, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was introduced. Designed to combat IRA terrorism, it led to the collective criminalisation of Irish people and created

what Paddy Hillyard has described as a 'suspect community' of Irish people living in Britain (Hillyard, 1993).

Despite, or perhaps because of, this increased hostility, Irish communities in England in the 1970s and the 1980s began to express their Irish identity in a more visible and openly self-conscious way, establishing societies and clubs and organising Irish cultural events (Curtis, 1987; Gray, 2000a; O'Grady, 1988). Over the period, the Catholic Church lost its position as a focus of Irish immigrant social life and identity. During the 1980s and, according to Gray (2000a), as part of the wider focus on multiculturalism and the anti-racism movement in London at least, Irish organisations began to campaign on behalf of the Irish as a ethnic minority, for which they received some government support (GLC, 1984). Growing recognition of the Irish as an ethnic group resulted in the Commission of Racial Equality funding research, published in 1997, on the position and needs of this community. The Commission was, however, derided in some sectors of society and by tabloid media for taking seriously the issue of anti-Irish racism (Walter, 2001:113).

In addition to the Catholic Church losing its position as the main repository of an Irish identity in England, women's groups, gay and lesbian groups and middle-class organisations began to challenge the assumption that to be Irish in England meant to be male, heterosexual, working class and with nationalist sympathies (Gray, 2000a:72). Since the early 1990s, a perceptively more celebratory sense of Irishness has also emerged (e.g. Holohon, 1995). Significantly, the IRA ceasefire in 1994 and the subsequent peace process has given rise to better relations between Ireland and Britain – and, arguably, a better understanding of the situation in Northern Ireland amongst people in Britain.

Without doubt, the success of the Irish economy in the 1990s and the repositioning of Ireland as a modern, European nation and attractive destination point has contributed to a more positive representation of Ireland and Irishness elsewhere, including England. This should not be overstated. The peace process has proved very difficult and dissident Republican groups have continued their campaign in Britain. Moreover, as the CRE report illustrated, one of the greatest problems of anti-Irish racism in Britain is the fact that it is ingrained and accepted within British society (Hickman & Walter, 1997:204). Notwithstanding this, the position of Irish people in Britain, for the reasons touched upon here, has been altered and, for many, much improved since the 1930s.

CONCLUSION

The societal context in which the women of this study lived as girls, women, religious and Irish is fundamental to understanding the choices they made and the subjectivities they have inhabited. As this chapter has shown, the Catholic-influenced, newly independent Irish society in which they were born and grew up positioned women within it in particular ways, and certain expectations and limitations were placed upon women as a result. In general, women were expected to become married mothers. The only acceptable alternative to this was religious life, the path chosen by the women of this study. As the second section highlighted, though relatively unchanged in the century or so before my respondents entered, religious life has been altered significantly by Vatican II, which continues to impact upon the lives of women religious to this day.

The final section of this chapter drew attention to the context of Irish migration to England and the positioning of Irish people in England which itself cannot be separated from the historical relationship between Ireland and Britain, constructions of Irishness or wider issues of immigration in Britain. Throughout, this chapter has tried to highlight themes of continuity and change both in Ireland and England, as well as within religious life. The aim has been to provide a frame for the women's oral history narratives, without suggesting that there could ever be 'one' position occupied either by women in Irish society or Irish people in Britain.

¹ The war of independence was immediately followed by a civil war fought over the terms of the treaty, which ended in mid-1923.

² Although Britain was the colonial power, the 'enemy' was England and the independent Irish state was more specifically Anglophobic than anti-British.

³ It was already an offence under the 1929 Censorship Act to publish, sell or distribute literature advocating birth-control. The 1935 Act merely closed potential loopholes.

⁴ Of course, there was nothing especially or intrinsically Irish about this.

⁵ Nor did the Catholic Church have a monopoly on notions of de-sexualised womanhood. This had, for instance, formed the basis of middle-class or elite Victorian womanhood.

⁶ And those who left Ireland.

⁷ The First Vatican Council had been convened in 1869 and proclaimed papal infallibility.

⁸ Although it was believed that the Catholic Church would change its position on contraception, an encyclical issued in 1969, *Humanae Vitae*, reiterated the Church's opposition to any 'un-natural' forms of contraception.

⁹ Due to changing farming techniques, the number of farm hands needed declined over this period. However, the demand for domestic service was not sated (see Clear, 2000).

¹⁰ The constitution of Ireland recognised the role of women as mothers in article 41:

The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights.

In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937:136)

¹¹ However, it is worth nothing (as Clear, 2000; Daly, 1997; and O'Dowd, 1987, have) that ideologies of womanhood in Ireland as predominantly home-based were little different to those elsewhere in Europe.

¹² Of course, some married women did not have children. However, contraception was banned in Ireland until the 1970s and reproduction was part of both Catholic and nationalist ideology, which contributed to the high fertility rate in Ireland over the period (Daly, 1997b).

¹³ Clear suggests discourses such as these to be explicit or implicitly assumed in much of the literature concerning the position of women in Ireland (2000:171). Representative examples that she gives and which have been drawn upon in this thesis include Beale (1987) and Valiulis (1995a, 1995b, 1997). See also Arensberg & Kimball (1940, 1968).

¹⁴ The exception to this was Josephine, who entered religious life in the post-Vatican period, the only woman in this study to do so.

¹⁵ As official registers were never kept, the figures given are only *net* rates of migration and are therefore not accurate (*Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems*, 1954:250).

¹⁶ It was not until the 2001 census that 'Irish' appeared as a distinct ethnic category. As a result, census reports prior to 2001 record only the number of Irish-born, not the number of people born of Irish parents or of Irish lineage who consider themselves to be Irish.

¹⁷ Due to undocumented migration to the US, the figures we have of 1980s migration are likely to be understated (Gray, 2000a:66).

¹⁸ Although the 2001 Census figures are not yet available for analysis, it is likely that they will reflect this.

¹⁹ Of the remaining 62%, 46% did not feel Irish people made any difference while 16% did not express an opinion (Delaney, 2000:266).

Chapter 5: GENDERED IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

Much of what has been written about Irish women's lives in the post-independent period has focused upon the limitations imposed by a conservative Catholic ideology, which situated women primarily in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers and in which the only acceptable roles for women were marriage and motherhood or religious life (see, for example, Clear, 2000; Valiulis, 1995a, 1995b, 1997). Historians of gender have explored the myriad ways in which women worked within and around these limitations to create a space for themselves in Irish society (Beaumont 1997, 1999; Cullen & Luddy, 2001; Daly, 1997b). However, this exploration of women's agency has not been extended to include the thousands of women who entered religious life either in Ireland or outside it.

This chapter begins by examining the women of this study's growing awareness of the gendered structures in place in the society in which they lived and the limited subject positions available to them as women. In the context of this, and suggesting a link between the two, the chapter then explores the women's attraction to religious life by focusing on the meanings they applied to it and the ways in which they framed their entry into it. Drawing on the women's accounts, and utilising rule books for the purposes of analysis, the next section deals with the pre-Vatican II regime. It highlights the gendered nature of religious life in this period and the ways in which the system 'moulded' women to conform to very specific notions of idealised womanhood

which continually marked them out as women. The final section examines the impact of Vatican II on the women's sense of themselves as women and explores the ways and means by which they have renegotiated a gendered identity in its wake. The purpose of the chapter, and a theme that runs throughout it, is to explore the ways in which the women of this study have crafted a sense of themselves as women in response to the gendered structures in which they have lived their lives.

GROWING UP

It was as they were growing up (between the 1910s and the 1960s) that the women of this study became aware of the particular roles women and men, girls and boys had in Irish society. Margaret observed that 'the girls helped mother and did the housework and the boys ...were free to do what they wanted!'. The lives of their mothers provided a model of marriage and motherhood for the women. Moreover, they were aware that their mothers were grooming them for this role and that they were being assigned certain domestic responsibilities as girls as a result: 'I was expected to do things that the boys were never expected to do' (Josephine).

It was by helping their mothers, and sometimes taking over the job of mothering, that the women became intimately familiar with the occupation and subject position they were expected to take on later in life. The women also became aware of the particular expectations of Irish Catholic motherhood. Frances described large families as 'part of the ethos of the time'. Elaine remarked 'my mother had six [but] all around us had eight, nine and ten and she was always disappointed because she had only six. She

always felt bad because she didn't have more', suggesting a degree of social pressure on women to have *many* children.

The women presented their own mothers as sacrificial figures. Catherine described her mother as 'so enduring, so patient [and] so sacrificing' while Margaret's mother was almost a martyr to motherhood, leaving Margaret to take over these responsibilities herself: 'my mother was worn out with child-bearing so she used to take to her bed ...and I ran the house. I did. I knew how to do it'. This conformed to the stereotypical image of Irish mothers as silent, suffering and self-sacrificing (Walter, 2001:18; Inglis, 1998:201, 212; O'Connor, 1998:62; Meaney, 1993:231).

Mothers were also presented as very strong figures. Frances' mother was 'the real live wire and ruler of the roost' while Catherine described her mother as a 'marvellous worker' in contrast to her 'delicate' father. Despite this, some of the women experienced firsthand the vulnerability of their mother's position in a society that officially exalted the role of motherhood but offered women who were mothers very little practical support. When Bernadette's father died, her mother was forced to put the six children into care and seek paid work. Similarly, Frances and her ten siblings were sent to schools across England and Ireland when their benefactor died. Although strong and self-sacrificing, their mothers were ultimately dependent figures.

The significant exception to marriage and motherhood as an acceptable pursuit for women to follow was religious life. Although nuns groomed Irish girls to become 'proper' mothers (Inglis, 1998:52), the irony was that their own lives presented girls

with an alternative path to marriage and motherhood, an influence not previously recognised. It was the sight of nuns that first attracted Annette, Irene and Bernadette to religious life. Annette and her young friends 'used to see the nuns go around saying the rosary ... We'd come home ... dress up as nuns [and] say the rosary. It was a life ambition. Almost from the cradle'.

Perhaps the most influential figure was the missionary nun. Several of the women recalled religious missionaries visiting their schools, among them Margaret:

[A visiting missionary Sister] talked about her work in Africa ... I was only eight at the time and I remember saying ... 'I want to do what you're doing'. It was almost like I always had the idea, I never thought of anything else.

Likewise, it was a visit from two missionary sisters to Pauline's school (aged 'nine or ten') that 'started it for me'. Certainly, it would be difficult to overestimate the impact of this energetic, youthful and unfamiliar woman disrupting the day's classes to tell pupils about her life in an 'exotic' land.

When the women talked about missionary life, it was in terms of the unknown. Their ambitions were to travel to, for example, 'Africa' (Pauline), 'California' (Hannah), 'Louisiana' (Margaret), 'Texas' (Vera), 'South America' (Norah),¹ places they had neither visited nor knew much about. Indeed, this was the attraction. In some ways, the roles of religious life and marriage and motherhood were similar: both involved sacrifice and devotion to others and were presented as idealised states of womanhood. However, the reality of motherhood and that of religious life, embodied by their own mothers and the nuns the women came into contact with, differed enormously. The

women were intimately familiar with the role of motherhood through their mother's lives. Although they were in contact with nuns in school,² and they and their institutions were a familiar sight in society, the women did not really 'know' religious. According to canon law,³ religious were not allowed to mix with seculars except in a professional capacity where they were obliged to maintain a distance from them. The women would have known very little about the lives of the nuns outside the classroom and an element of mystery still surrounded those lives, especially that of missionary sisters.

The work of religious was also very different to the kind of work the women saw their mothers do. None of the women's mothers were in paid employment.⁴ Instead, they worked inside the home raising families and, for the most part, worked on the family farm as well. The lives of domesticity associated with their mothers were not lives they easily associated with nuns: nuns did do domestic work, but not in sight of the girls. The religious they saw worked in schools, hospitals and other institutions.

In fact, then, the lives of religious were at odds with those of the women's mothers in terms of the work they did and their living arrangements. Significantly, the clothes they wore were also very different. The habit symbolised professionalism, responsibility and power. It could also represent perfection. Describing a school visit from two missionary sisters, Kate remarked that she:

...liked the postulants dress and I liked these white cuffs, you see, and the veil and the bit of white around it. And she was a nice girl and the nun had a nice habit too, so, I don't know, that just attracted me.

Rebecca was also drawn to the dress of the nuns she was taught by – especially the linen hankies they carried ('that was the first thing that attracted me').

The perfectly pressed dark habit and veil contrasted with the whiteness of the cuff, wimple or hanky and vividly symbolised the purity and perfection which the nuns embodied. The crisp uniforms, which would not have lasted a moment on the family farm, suited the professional work and life of religious. The calm, controlled demeanour that nuns were supposed to emanate would have added to this professionalism. The women's mother's clothes, on the other hand, would probably have represented their domestic responsibilities and farm labour and been actually dirty as a result.⁵ By contrast, the habit was clean, a protection from impurity and dirt. Indeed, the domestic drudgery of farm labour would have been thrown into relief by the pure and perfect image of religious life. While idealised notions of religious life and Catholic motherhood both drew on qualities associated with the Virgin Mary, the purity of religious life symbolised this more than the often harsh reality of life in rural Ireland for many women.

Not all the women in this study were absolutely convinced of their religious vocation before they joined religious life and entered with the attitude that if it was not for them, this would become clear to either themselves or their superior during their time in the noviciate. As a result, Josephine 'decided I [would] give it a try ...I mean, I entered giving it a whirl'. Likewise, Vera's attitude was to 'give it a spin ...I didn't know whether I'd stay or not', Geraldine's that she would 'give it a go'. This represents another significant difference between marriage and motherhood and

religious life: religious life included a trial period. Before final vows were taken, the women were free to leave the convent and the congregation was free to send them home. Afterwards, a dispensation from the Pope was required for them to leave (but still possible).

In Ireland, there was a social stigma attached to leaving religious life (or, worse still, being asked to leave) but it was not as great as that surrounding single motherhood and many of the women entered knowing that their family would support them whatever happened: 'There was the real stress [from my parents] on the fact that if I wanted to come back I was to come home ...I was under [no] pressure to stay' (Lilian). Moreover, if women did leave religious life, their dowry was returned to them and if they left after final vows, following a longer period in religious life, they could receive a further sum to help them as they re-adjusted to secular life. Naturally, they also took their training and qualifications with them. Some, though not all, congregations even placed ex-nuns in employment. By contrast, few support systems existed to help women who realised they had made the wrong decision in marriage.

Remaining permanently single was another option open to the women of this study, although spinsters held a very low position in Irish society. That spinsterhood was considered a 'bad' form of womanhood was made clear to Joan by her cousin, a priest, when he offered her the following sage advice:

He said to me 'Joan, what are you going to do with yourself?' ...I didn't give him any answer. He said 'Joan, get married or be a nun. Don't be an old maid. They don't make good women.'

The fact that Joan's cousin was a priest lent additional weight to his comments but, in fact, none of the women considered spinsterhood as an attractive option for themselves. The message they had received as they were growing up was that women were legitimated by the institutions to which they belonged. Although women were venerated for taking on certain kinds of work before marriage (for example, teaching) ultimately, power, prestige and respect, however complex, resided in the institutions of the family (land, property, children) or religious life. Outside this, lay the marginality and 'misery' (Byrne, 1997:415) of spinsterhood or the deviance and depravity of the 'fallen woman'.

Meanings of Religious Life

While some of the women had harboured ambitions for religious life from a young age, it was as teenagers that most thought seriously about entering. The attitudes of their families to their vocation tended to reflect the social status of religious in Irish society. The manner in which the women described their own attraction to religious life, however, revealed that they placed quite a different meaning onto it. Specifically, they saw in it opportunities for themselves as individuals that their families did not seem to recognise.

Family Responses to Religious Life

Given the importance of Catholicism and the status of religious in Ireland during the period in which the women of this study were growing up, it is not surprising that most families responded positively to the prospect of their daughter (or sister) entering

religious life. 'Delighted' was the term used by Frances and Elaine to describe their families' response, while others used 'happy' or 'very happy'.⁶ Some parents actually fostered such ambitions for their daughter. When Kate let her family know about her vocation, her mother 'was pleased. I think [she] hoped at the bottom of her [heart] that one of us would enter, either my sister or I'. Similarly, Frances was her mother's 'last hope' given that, with the exception of a brother who had died, none of her ten siblings had expressed a desire to enter. Some parents clearly expected a vocation in the family, as was suggested by the comments Hannah made when asked if her parents were pleased with her vocation:

Oh yes, I think they were. I mean, they were happy because there was a lot of religious in our family anyway [But] there was [religious] in nearly every family. In all the families, there was at least one. Either a priest or a nun. Or both maybe, sometimes.

Kate's family were not alone in describing her vocation as a 'privilege' while her sister believed it to be a 'blessing on the whole family'. This blessing was social as well as religious: Eileen's family thought it a 'great feather in [their] cap' while Margaret's mother was 'very proud that I became a sister. She found that, you know, socially it was one up on the neighbours'. As a vocation was a direct calling from God, it served to elevate the individual involved. As a sign of good parenting, it also conferred status on the family. Religious life was also regarded as a profession, and there was often an implicit reference to class mobility in families' responses. Moreover, some congregations were considered to be more middle-class than others. The firmly middle-class congregation that Frances intended to enter was 'part of the appeal to my mother because she was a snob'.

The women were aware, however, that their vocations were not responded to as positively as a son's vocation for the priesthood would have been. As Margaret suggested, the priesthood was the ultimate accolade for parents: 'to have a son a priest was ...the height of *whatever*, you know, it was wonderful!'. Almost all the women qualified their families' enthusiastic response to their own vocation with comments similar to Frances' that it was 'second-best to a priest, of course!'. As Kate put it, 'it was a privilege ...to have a sister [in the family] but not as great [as a priest]'.

A useful tool in interpreting the meaning the women's families attached to religious life is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' (see chapter two). Bourdieu was interested in exploring the social aspects of cultural production and understood social relations to be based on the distribution of different forms of capital – economic, cultural and social. Through processes of legitimation, these different forms of capital could be transformed into symbolic capital, conferring strength, power and profit on the holder (Moi, 1991; Skeggs, 1997; Lovell, 2000). The responses of these women's families reflect a recognition that their daughter's entry into religious life could be translated into symbolic capital because of the status of Catholicism and religious themselves in Irish society. Their correct assessment of the greater social power of priests in society, and the lesser status of nuns, illustrates the gendered nature of capital.

While daughters could provide a route to accumulating 'symbolic capital', they might also be the cause of its depletion. In the society in which these women grew up, morality was considered vital to respectability and the Catholic Church's obsession

with morality, especially women's morality, has already been explored (chapter four). It is in this context that Elaine's mother responded to her daughter's vocation: 'she said, 'oh, that's fine. She's safe now'.

Influenced by the anxiety that surrounded sexual morality, Elaine's mother was concerned for her daughter's 'purity', which could be read as virginity.⁷ The convent was regarded by Elaine's mother and others like her as a safe-haven, a place where their daughter's virginity would be protected (and which would leave their own social position unthreatened). The status of women religious in Ireland was closely related to their perceived purity and vow of celibacy. Indeed, up until the 1960s, the status of married women who were mothers as well as religious was intimately linked with their sexuality – its control or repression (see chapter four).

Not all the women's families responded positively to their daughter's vocation. Rebecca and Vera's families were both upper middle-class and had distinguished themselves from other Irish Catholic on that basis. Their families did not stand to gain socially from their entry – indeed, their position might even be threatened by it as religious were generally drawn from the lower middle-classes (Clear, 1987a; Magray, 1998). Rebecca's mother refused to be implicated in her daughter's vocation at all:

She said, 'If you've got a vocation, I don't know where it came from. It's not from me and it's certainly not from your father! ... You can put it out of your head till you're 21'. So I didn't put it out of my mind but I didn't mention it to her again.

It was not the protection of class allegiance but the period in which their daughter's vocation came that influenced Josephine's parents' response. The youngest of my respondents, she first made her vocation public in the late 1960s, when she was eighteen:

I threw it out as an idea at home and my parents went ballistic! My father mainly because he didn't want me to leave but my mother because she thought that being a nun was a *total* waste of time.

Josephine's parents had expected her to do 'the normal thing', which included 'finding a good job, marrying a nice man and having children' ('a lot of my guilt in the early days was that I wasn't giving my parents grandchildren'). Their response may have reflected the social changes that had taken place in Irish society in the 1960s, particularly regarding the position of women and the de-valuing of religious life. Although still respected (and needed) for the work they did, the status of nuns had diminished considerably.

Josephine suggested that her parents' response was partly related to the re-categorisation of nuns as non-women. She observed that by the late 1960s 'you didn't see religious as women, as such. You just saw them as this kind of neutered gender, wandering around the place' ('wandering' might also suggest without direction or reason). The neutrality of religious was echoed by Clear when she commented that nuns were 'ambiguously' positioned in terms of their gender (1987a:xvii) and also in Beale's reiteration of an 'old saying' that there were 'three sexes – men, women and nuns' (1987:174). Social mores during the devotional revolution had served to repress women's sexuality in Irish society. This was beginning to change in the 1960s but

religious were still regarded as sexually repressed which served to exclude them from the category of 'woman'. However, as will be shown later in this chapter, although interpreted as gender-less, women in religious life were continually marked out precisely as women.

The Women's Interpretation of Religious Life

Rather than focusing on the status of nuns in an abstract sense, the women themselves had quite specific ideas as to what religious life would offer them and tended to be more particular in describing their attraction to it. In this section, the women's interpretations of religious life are explored under headings suggested by their accounts.

The Missions

For most of the women in this study, the initial attraction to religious life was the opportunity to 'go on the missions'. Missionaries were important figures while missionary work gave women the opportunity to travel to 'exotic' places. In addition, it involved them in an important international project of the Catholic Church, enabling them to amass social and cultural capital, without the negative connotations of 'emigration'. As Lilian put it, 'the most wonderful thing you could do was to go abroad and save children that were [otherwise] doomed to hell'. Many of the women shared the same romantic picture of the missions that Vera did when she admitted to 'the crazy ideas you have ...that it's all sunshine and sitting under palm trees and teaching little children'.

The 'little children' were an adoring audience, while 'saving' them may have appealed to the maternal 'instincts' the women had been groomed to develop. In describing missionary life, the setting was all important: the sun was always shining and it was never cold. The reference to palm trees completes this exotic picture which is in marked contrast to Ireland's physical geography. In fact, the image of heat lends a certain comfort to missionary life not always available at home.⁸

The missions offered the possibility of adventure but also of heroism, if not in this world, then in the next. Annette's attraction to the missions was based on the lives of martyrs and saints:

Little St. Tereza ...was held up to us as an example. Fr. Damien [too] There was all this thing about Damien the Leper and going out and getting leprosy ...I think I scared the wits out of my mother!⁹

Although Annette drew on sacrifice to explain her attraction to religious life, it was a particular form of surrender, more heroic and public than the silent (private) sacrifice of Irish Republican motherhood (Valiulis, 1995a:117). Significantly, she made no distinction between Tereza and Damien. Each were legitimate role models for her because martyrdom was not gender specific. Moreover, the missions may have been recognised as offering the space for negotiation or re-interpretation of gender roles in *this* life. While women's work on the missions tended to conform to their traditional role (as nurturer), the accounts draw attention to the opportunity for adventure and heroism, which were certainly not considered to be female traits.

Annette's ambitions were also an act of rebellion against her mother's 'safe' (boring?) middle-class existence, for which the missions were the perfect antidote. Missionary life was presented (and interpreted) as more free and less restrictive. In the following quote, Catherine makes an explicit distinction between religious life and marriage and motherhood:

I felt that if I wanted to go and look after all these babies and children, and wanted to travel and do all these different things, that if I was married and had children of my own, that was the end of it.

Likewise, Geraldine had 'a sense that being married and with children was going to interfere with the plans I had for myself'. In both these cases, the women recognised religious life as an alternative life and chose it in preference to the limitations, as they saw it, of marriage and motherhood. Nor were they the only women who drew a binary between motherhood which confined women to a particular space (immobility), and the opportunities of religious life to travel and work (mobility). Presented this way, marriage and motherhood signals the 'end' of something, whereas religious life marked the beginning. As Josephine put it (not to do with missionary life necessarily): 'if you do have children and ...a husband and ...a home, although you might have a sense of stability and security ...there's a lot of doors closed to you'. In addition to making a claim on individuality and autonomy, the women's attitudes might also suggest a refusal to be, or be seen to be, merely pawns in the capital accumulation strategies of other people.

Professional Advancement & Personal Achievement

Less exotic perhaps but hardly less appealing was the opportunity religious life gave women to claim a professional position in society. Religious life was regarded in Irish society as a profession in itself, illustrated in Kate's remark that 'you either wanted to get married or you didn't and [religious life] was a job, a position, if you like'.

Moreover, it often involved actual professional training and this was part of the appeal for many women. Eileen situated her vocation precisely in relation to the possibility it offered for further education:

The opportunities for education [for me] weren't all that great because I came from a big family and my father had died when I was a teenager ...and that's how [my vocation] happened ...there was no thing about 'saving souls'.

Training was not available to all women and depended on resources and the support of family. Moreover, tertiary education might not have been given the same priority as a religious vocation, as Eileen suggested when describing her family's efforts to assist her: 'It was a time when funds wouldn't have been ...plentiful ...but there was nothing spared for ...what I needed'.

Specific professional training was part of the appeal to other women too. As had been the case for Eileen, Kate, Sarah, Rebecca and Hannah wanted to be teaching sisters; Bernadette wanted specifically to become a nursing sister ('nothing else!') while Catherine and Josephine wanted to do social work. Religious life was often multi-vocational, as much a professional as a spiritual calling.¹⁰

Like Eileen, Margaret described her vocation with respect to other motivations, identifying the opportunities not just for training or travel but career and career advancement. While she observed that ‘there was a sacrificial aspect to it’ she recognised too that ‘maybe unconsciously it did give you an opportunity to be educated, to travel ... You could become a head mistress [or] the matron of a hospital’.

Professional careers were limited for women in Ireland by resources, legislation and social mores. It was especially difficult for women to pursue a career after marriage, while considerable negative associations were placed on spinsterhood. Nuns were valued precisely for the work they did. In addition, congregations were often very large international institutions with sophisticated organisational and professional infrastructures, offering different internal career paths and the possibility of quite high-powered positions in management.¹¹ They also had a monopoly over most of the traditional areas of women’s paid employment in Ireland, running (as they did) schools, hospitals and other institutions. Indeed, a life-long career distinguished religious from other women, including the women’s mothers.

It was the prospect of a career over the path followed by her mother and sisters that attracted Teresa to religious life:

At the time [religious life] was ...a way of life that was different to farming ...It was one of the paths to choose if you wanted a career ...probably one of my motivations [was not] ending up being the farmer’s wife.

Teresa did not rely on traditional discourses of sacrifice or spiritual calling to explain her vocation, putting her own agency to the fore instead. Her comments suggest a

dichotomy between life inside the congregation, which offered her the chance of a career, and life outside it, where there was no chance of one. The fact that she did not identify a specific career highlights the possibilities she felt religious life offered, in contrast to the limitations and predictability of the farm. Religious life is also presented as a form of personal control in opposition to rural life where women become the property of their husbands (as Teresa identified: 'farmer's wife'), thus setting up another dichotomy between autonomy and physical possession by another.

Difference and Perfection

Religious life, with its associations of sacrifice, purity and divine communication (a vocation was a calling from God) was glorified by the Catholic Church and esteemed in Irish society. The exalted positioning of religious life appealed to the romanticism of some young women. Sarah, 'as an idealistic young woman thought, I'm going to do the very best with my life ...and the very best that was presented to you ...was religious life'.

Sacrifice was valued in women and many of my respondents used discourses of sacrifice (itself a gendered concept) to describe their vocation, among them Josephine ('I was imbued with that whole sense of sacrifice and service and doing things for other people, I was brought up that way') and Annette:

The word sacrifice sounds negative [today] but we were doing something positive by giving up everything to bring a blessing down on those around us and on the world ...It was the ideal of doing things for others. [Annette]¹²

Religious life was a kind of perfect life that resembled in dress and deed the image of the Madonna familiar to the women at school, at home and in church. As virgins they represented the mother of God and this elevated them above other women. Some women were particularly attracted to the symbolism that religious life represented and the symbolic capital that went with it.

Resistance

Some women had a less than positive view of religious life or, more specifically, the religious they were familiar with. Geraldine ‘hated’ the nuns at her school, while Catherine and Lilian found them ‘very strict’ and ‘quite severe’. These women talked about the difficulty of coming to terms with their own vocation and framed it as a form of resistance to particular kinds of religious. Catherine did not want to be seen to be following the well-worn path taken by so many of her relatives, while Lilian was put off by the idealisation of religious life as a ‘perfect life’, symbolised by the habit which she regarded as a kind of unconvincing costume. She remembered ‘reading books about perfection in religious life and it didn’t interest me in the slightest ... There was *no way* I was going down that road, dressed up in a *whatever!*’

All these women ‘gave in, in the end’, as Catherine put it, by renegotiating the kind of religious they would become. In place of the ‘strict’ nun (Catherine/Lilian) or ‘overbearing relative’ (Geraldine) they would be ‘exotic’ (Catherine) or ‘spiritual’ (Lilian). In so doing, these women renegotiated on a micro-level what religious life could mean

by resisting and rejecting particular stereotypical images of religious life for themselves.

The way the women described their own attraction to religious life revealed that they applied quite different meanings to it than their families had.¹³ Although they recognised the social importance of becoming a nun, they emphasised the opportunities religious life offered them in the context of a particularly religious and gendered society. While their families tended to see religious life in terms of a Church hierarchy in which nuns were negatively placed, the women looked on religious life in relation to other women's lives, most especially that of their mothers. They recognised in religious life the opportunity to follow a different path, pursue ambitions either not available or incompatible with marriage and motherhood. These included the possibility of travel and working on the missions, of professional training and career advancement. Some were attracted to the 'perfection' of religious life while others claimed not to be attracted to religious life at all.

As their families had, the women of this study recognised the potential within religious life of accumulating social, cultural and symbolic capital. However, more than their families had, they recognised the actual practical benefits religious life offered them, beyond positive but abstract associations to be had from being a professed sister within the Catholic Church. Lovell (2000:20-21) has shown that while Bourdieu recognised women's ability to accrue symbolic capital, he regarded them generally as 'social objects' – repositories of value and capital. He failed to explore adequately their potential as 'capital accumulating subjects' or that women might be aware of this

potential themselves. This was true of the women's families also. The meaning the women themselves applied to religious life, revealed that they were aware both of its ability to confer symbolic capital on them as 'objects' but also of the potential for themselves as capital accumulating subjects, through education, training and work. The difference between how the women and their families interpreted religious life highlights the way in which women are constructed as 'objects' but present themselves as subjects. In addition, it highlights their awareness of gendered limitations and their attempts to work around and within them to achieve personal ambitions. Although many of the women drew on established discourses of self-sacrifice and oblation in explaining their vocation and attraction to religious life, some did not. Moreover, *all* the women's narratives emphasised agency and subjectivity: they claimed 'ownership' of their vocation and rejected suggestions that they were forced or bullied into religious life ('twasn't that we had to run into the convent because nobody'd marry us. It wasn't anything like that!' (Annette)).

Choosing Congregations

The women chose congregations in response to a range of factors. Interestingly, when it came to deciding upon a specific congregation, none of the women entered exclusively missionary orders. In fact, it was only Pauline who held the same attraction to the missions when entering as she had as a young girl. For some, ill health had turned them off the idea while for others, it was something they felt they had 'grown out of'.¹⁴ Four of the women – Frances, Margaret, Rebecca and Sarah – entered into the congregation they had been taught by, although only Sarah was

specifically attracted to the fact that it was a teaching order ('it was their attitude to children – *amazing* respect ...and belief in developing the whole child').¹⁵ Although Margaret's mother felt she 'owed' it to her former educators to enter with them, her own positive experience of schooling and familiarity with the community was also part of the attraction, as it was for Frances and Rebecca. It was also the case, however, that the three congregations these women entered were well respected, middle-class institutions with good teaching reputations.

With the exception of one woman, Irene, whose application had been refused (because she did not hold the requisite educational qualifications), the rest of the women made a positive decision *not* to enter with those they had been taught by. For most, this meant deciding not to join the Sisters of Mercy, Ireland's largest religious congregation and one that had been set up in Dublin in 1831 by Catherine McAuley.¹⁶ The women gave various reasons for their decision not to stay with the congregation they were taught by. Josephine felt the Presentation Order were too old-fashioned and set in their ways while Lilian's experience of them, noted above, was that they were too strict. Although May had initially planned to enter with the Dominicans she changed her mind after a meeting with a sister of the St. Mildred congregation.

The Mercy sisters were, according to Annette, 'very aloof ...too formal'. By contrast, Hannah described them as 'generous and hospitable [such that] you'd be too close to family and there'd be calls and that' which suggested over familiarity. Although Mercy nuns had told Bernadette they would train her to become a nurse, she declined their offer because they were not solely devoted to nursing. Elaine decided against the

Mercy's because 'at that time, they were all teachers' and she was studying to become a nurse. However, she later entered a teaching congregation. Catherine and Geraldine, neither of whom had liked the Mercy nuns they had been taught by (see above), were also discouraged by the fact they had relatives in the congregation. For example, Catherine did not want to be seen to be 'joining [just] because of them'. Perhaps the greatest insight came from Kate, however, who had the following to say when asked if she had thought about entering the Mercy congregation:

No, I hadn't. I wouldn't. I don't know what it was. I can't explain that to you. I think it's maybe something with me about some place you don't know. Like, it's said that the unknown is always more exciting than what you know already and I think there was a lot of that in it for me.

Although Kate could only have been speaking for herself, the impression was that her comments might be more generally applied. For many of the women it seemed the congregations they had been taught by, especially the large Irish congregations like the Presentation and Mercy, were simply too familiar, not different or exciting enough for the women – and perhaps had negative class associations too. For example, Bernadette received her education in an industrial school run by the Mercy order where her mother worked and felt perhaps that the association might stay with her. As they had framed their attraction to religious life more generally, the women described their attraction to specific congregations in terms of it being a less obvious or usual pursuit – one that offered them a more exclusive and exotic lifestyle. For me, the fact that they chose congregations that were not Irish was a symbol of this. In support of this, many of the women referred to a perception at the time that there were 'too many nuns in Ireland'.

The women who decided not to enter the congregations they were taught by came into contact with the ones they chose in preference through sisters or cousins having joined, through family friends, Catholic connections or by meeting members canvassing for vocations or donations. They tended then to describe these congregations in oppositional terms to the ones they were more familiar with. For example, the sisters of St. Louise were ‘delightfully simple, compared to the Mercy nuns!’ (Annette), while the sisters of St. Marie ‘just seemed a bit more normal’ (Lilian) than the Presentation sisters. Despite its importance in defining the initial appeal of religious life, the specific work of congregations was rarely identified as its main attraction,¹⁷ although this might also have been because specific work opportunities would have been available in more than one congregation. Instead, the women tended to frame their attraction in terms of the particular attitude or atmosphere they could identify within the congregation. For example, May thought that the ‘spirit’ of the St. Mildred congregation was ‘wonderful ...I was so impressed when I first met them, of their warmth, their welcome, their hospitality, their joy, that it began to work on me’.

Some women were attracted to the distance specific congregations offered them. Geraldine was ‘fed up’ being compared to her elder sister (a Mercy nun) and chose to enter a congregation in England. Likewise Vera, who considered Irish congregations ‘too inward looking, too pinny [i.e. uptight]’, wanted to leave Ireland. If Hannah was sure of anything it was that she was:

...going out of Ireland. That I did know ...I didn’t want to stay in a parochial [setting] where people knew each other. Where if something went wrong in the family,

somebody would be telling you. I mean, that wasn't why I was going to enter religion ...In some religious houses in Ireland ...there might be two or three [from the one family] or cousins [It's] too much, too close ...If something was going wrong in the family, let's say with the marriage, they'd try to get the religious involved. I didn't want that. I knew subconsciously without articulating it.

For these women, not only non-Irish congregations, but congregations outside Ireland gave them the particular distance they were seeking from the familiarity of home and the obligations associated with it.

In general, the women of this study made up their own minds about the congregations they entered into. Some were influenced by the opinions of others – for example, a priest had introduced May to the St. Mildred congregation while it was Hannah's uncle who suggested the same congregation to her – but they claimed their decision as their own. Kate sought the advice of three priests when choosing a congregation. In the drama that was created around her vocation as a result, however, she became more, not less, important in the decision making process. Contradicting the received wisdom that women who entered congregations were dupes, these accounts highlight also the very discriminating ways in which women made choices about the congregations they entered into, suggesting the women neither saw congregations or individual religious as an homogeneous group.

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE PRE-VATICAN II PERIOD

Prior to entry, the women's expectations of and ambitions for religious life focused on the work of active nuns and idealised notions of sacrifice and a life of prayer. After entering, however, they quickly learned that religious life in the pre-Vatican II period

was primarily and fundamentally about ‘becoming’ a nun, through a very scripted process of learning, performance and surveillance. In this section, I draw on rule books of the day as well as the women’s accounts, to explore how religious life defined womanhood and what the women’s experience of this was.

The structure of religious life was strictly regulated by canon law, ‘the rule’ and the authority of the superior. The historical precedent to the rule’s severity was in the suspicion that grew up around women choosing to eschew the traditional path of marriage and motherhood for life in all-female communities, and attempts by the Church to control them.¹⁸ By the time the women of this study entered religious life, however, the rule had become the faith and it remained so until the changes introduced by Vatican II:

The sacred collection of rules were the be all and end all ... The black book was what was keeping you ... You had this idea ... ‘keep the rule and the rule will keep you’ ... [there was] no [other] judgement of how you were doing. If you went to confession that was the sort of thing you’d look at, you know, if you’d been wasteful – or maybe that your knees weren’t stuck together! [Frances]

As women were not born nuns, they had to become them. The process by which they were to be ‘transformed’ involved a rejection of the secular world and their secular selves. This was essentially an identity project, involving the breakdown of one identity (the secular self) and its replacement with the congregational identity set out in the rule book. Moving into the convent, wearing a habit and replacing one’s baptismal name with that of a Saint were all metaphorical symbols by which the secular self was put to death and the women were ‘re-born’ into religious life. The St. Mildred rule book stated that the sisters should:

Strip themselves of all merely carnal affection for their relatives ...Thus dead to the world and to self they will live only to Christ our Lord, holding Him in place of father, mother, brother and all things. [Congregation of the Sisters of St. Mildred:74, henceforth CSSM]

This process, however, was thoroughly gendered.¹⁹ It demanded that the women strive to become a particular kind of woman ('pure'/'perfect')²⁰ through repression and denial. Religious life attempted to control the female self by regulating her body. One of the ways in which this was done, was through the habit.

The Habit

The pre-Vatican II habit was unwieldy, restrictive and uncomfortable. Irene described it as 'difficult because it was *very* heavy ...and the headgear was cumbersome too'. Although she 'got used to it', Teresa recalled having to strap herself 'into this *thing*, this terrible thing. Everyday'. The habit was also difficult to maintain:

We had buttons and you had to get these seventeen or nineteen buttons straight. Oh, it was a nightmare! Absolute nightmare! ...If you weren't a good needle woman, it was dreadful! [Dressing] was a very big operation. [Hannah]

The habit covered the female body from head to foot, concealing the shape of the women who wore them. It forbade the women any investment in the dominant cultural attributes assigned to the female sex. As Teresa said: 'it was terrible! ...We were bound up and tied up! Any bit of femininity was completely squashed!'. Symbolically covering the women, the habit also physically repressed the female form by keeping the breasts not only hidden, but compressed:

There was this denial of ...your womanly body ...In the early days, you weren't allowed to wear a bra ...your breasts didn't exist. You didn't have breasts so there were no bras [They] were bound. [Margaret]

Reflecting the pre-Vatican II regime's repression of femininity, Margaret's quote also illustrates that system's attempt to reconstruct and transform potentially 'bad' women into 'good'. Indeed, there was a clear tension between the divine spiritual calling of a vocation and the 'inferior' female body in which it was housed. This was a theme that ran through the rule books. For example, the Sisters of the St. Nadine congregation were to be 'mindful, on the one hand, of the holiness of their vocation' but aware of the 'dangers to which [it] may be exposed' (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Nadine:49, henceforth CSSN). The discomfort of the habit represented the uneasy relationship between the vocation and the body in which it lived, accentuating the female body as 'wrong' and serving as a reminder that the body was 'other' to its spiritual vocation.

Investing in one's physical appearance was regarded as vanity, a 'natural' female 'fault' which the pre-Vatican II regime aimed to contain. As Catherine put it:

You were taught – conditioned – not to [like yourself]. Anything to do with yourself was considered to be pride. How you looked, how you dressed, how you walked, how you talked, if you had a rib of hair showing. When I was a postulant I had very curly hair. And when I washed it, it used to fall into all waves ...I remember [once my] veil [was] hanging off the back of my head and getting *slated* for being proud, showing off my hair, you know?

There were no mirrors in convents, hair was cut short and hidden (as were bodily curves) and, though expected to be well turned out, religious were not supposed to be concerned with their appearance. An example of this came from Hannah who, on her graduation from university was forbidden from having her picture taken with her newly-ordained cousin priest because 'I was a young nun and [they] probably thought

it was good for my humility'. Humility was an important element of the pre-Vatican II regime, maintaining the women's modesty and avoiding indulgence.

The Body

The body was also controlled by keeping in check what was put into it. Religious were given 'adequate food' to sustain them for the work they did but were expected to limit their intake. As Annette recalled:

After mass you'd go down to breakfast. Now, at that time, if you had porridge, you couldn't have bread and butter and if you had an egg, you couldn't have marmalade. You know, 'twas very, very rationed.

In addition, the women were encouraged to fast regularly and were expected, as an act of humility, to eat food they did not like over food they preferred. When eating outside the congregation, Sisters of the St. Nadine congregation were to 'observe great moderation and much reserve ...carefully guarding against the natural inclination to satisfy sensuality' (CSSN:87).

In the Christian tradition, women were regarded as weaker and less rational than men. This was reflected in religious life. As Frances put it:

The attitude to women religious was that they were not capable – their minds were so limited they couldn't appreciate the full Office²¹ so ...because we were women ...we had what was called a 'Little Office of Our Lady' which was a *tiny* group of songs [and] little bits of scripture in Latin.

Women were also more intimately linked to the body than men were (see Wiesner, 1993:1-36; also, King, 1995; Ruether, 1974). Margaret described being a woman as 'something to be ashamed of in religious life', not only its exterior but its internal

functions also. She pointed out that the sisters ‘didn’t even have proper sanitary protection ...it was a shameful thing to have periods ...to need things for your body’. Once again, the tension between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ female is being reproduced. Women were capable of being ‘good’ by striving towards the perfection of the Virgin Mary, but they were intrinsically ‘bad’ and their female bodies were a constant reminder of this. Women’s bodies were also placed ambiguously in another binary – that of ‘dirty’/‘clean’. Cleanliness is a recurring theme in the rule books precisely because women were also constructed as ‘soiled’/‘dirty’.²² Before Vatican II, female religious were not allowed to touch the vessel that held the Blessed Sacrament if they were menstruating. This represents the central tension of religious life for women: despite their vocation, their earthly female bodies could not be overcome. The menstruating cycle demonstrated this and served to reduce religious women to their essential ‘impurity’.

Sexuality

Although of feeble mind, women’s bodies were regarded as powerful and dangerous and were especially connected with sexuality and reproduction. Pre-Vatican II religious rule books reflected this in their almost obsessive preoccupation with sexuality.²³ As the rule illustrated, one important way in which religious life controlled the body, was by keeping it busy – especially through work, prayer, and deportment:

In order to avoid the innumerable faults of which idleness is a pernicious source, each one shall always be occupied at some work [or] spiritual exercise. [CSSN:50]

The head ...should be kept straight and bent a little forward ...The eyes should usually be cast down ...The lips should be neither compressed nor too much open ...The hands ...should be kept still and placed modestly. [CSSM:59-60]

In the following quote, Elaine euphemistically connects the physical demands of religious life with the purpose of those demands:

You were regulated: the way you talked, the way you walked, and your eyes cast down and not searching and looking around, you know? ...Religious life was terribly guarded, you were secured all the time. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't commit it! You couldn't do anything.

Although she did not specify what she meant by 'it' here, in other comments she made about the importance of the rule in protecting women from developing or acting upon their attractions to others, it was clear Elaine was talking about sexual activity.

Whole chapters of rule books were dedicated to the correct behaviour of nuns in the presence of men. Although the convent and its enclosure gave some degree of protection, active religious did come into contact with men through work, administration and convent management, during which times they were urged to 'take all precaution' (CSSM:35) by 'exercising the greatest vigilance over all the senses, interior and exterior alike' (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Marie:40, henceforth CSSMa). Religious had to cover their faces in public, avoid eye contact with men and control their thoughts through prayer. Catherine remembered the practical repercussions if these rules were not properly adhered to:

If you were caught talking to a man or a priest, oh, sure! [Say I was] talking to a priest ...it mattered a lot to other people. You'd be seen talking and then they'd stop [you] ...I think they thought they were safe-guarding you, you know, [so that] you wouldn't run off with them or something like that.

Rule books made clear the dangers of sexuality but constructed the women themselves as the problem – potential temptresses – and tended to locate danger within the women rather than the men they met. In a male religious ‘manual’ I came across, control of sexuality was a major theme although the figure of the ‘female temptress’ was still very much present. In a section, which supposedly quoted a woman, the ‘ideal priest’ was implored not to :

...permit himself to be seduced by the mystery of our sex ...The more he gives us, the more we will need ...Let him learn to spot our ‘pretexts’ beneath ‘our reasons’ (The Priests of the Heart of Jesus, 1961:213).

Religious life was not only concerned to protect against heterosexual relations but also to control relations between women. ‘Particular friendships’, the term used in most rule books to describe close friendships, were absolutely forbidden (‘[the sisters] will have a great horror of private friendships’ (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Louise:114, henceforth CSSL) and there were strict guidelines concerning physicality between sisters (‘no [sister] should touch another, even playfully’ (CSSM:66)). Several of the women in this study mentioned the rules governing relations between sisters. Frances remarked that ‘getting together in two’s or three’s ...was *absolutely* frowned upon’ while Annette recalled that ‘if anyone got very great [i.e. close] with another sister in the community, I think she’d have been put out [or] changed to another house’. As Catherine’s comment suggests, suspicion could be easily aroused: ‘[If] you talk[ed] to anybody ...they’d think you had a particular friendship with them and they’d be separating you’.

Religious also had to control their relationship with their own body. It was as they dressed, undressed and in bed that the women were least protected by surveillance and clothes and many rule books instructed the women on correct behaviour to avoid seeing or touching their own naked body. Some directed women on how to position their bodies (hands crossed across the chest) and what to think of as they fell asleep, surely to prevent their minds (and hands) from wandering. The St. Louise rule book instructed its members when going to sleep to 'occupy themselves with the thought of God, and of the subject of their meditation for the morrow' (CSSL:145). Rule books' near obsession with sexuality suggests that it was never successfully eliminated. Indeed, the women would have had to think, though not speak, about controlling their sexuality a great deal while the rule books themselves were discourses of sexuality – in which the existence, albeit repressed, of heterosexuality, lesbian sexuality and autoeroticism were often referred to in veiled or less-veiled terminology.

Religious life was drawn along gendered lines and the process by which women became nuns was thoroughly gendered, based on the control of their 'weak' mind over their powerful bodies. Gender remained of absolute importance in religious life. Everything – religious' clothes, living arrangements, reading and prayer material – was organised on the basis of their sex. They were continually being marked out as females, precisely through a process that attempted to repress and deny their femininity. While not considered 'feminine' necessarily, there could be no real ambiguity about the sex of women religious. Thus, although regarded as 'gender-neutral', this was more a point about femininity and the way sex tends to be read from gender, than a reflection of nun's actual transcendence of gender. Religious

institutions in the pre-Vatican II period were ‘total institutions’ (Goffman, 1961), requiring those that entered to replace their individual identities with that of the religious congregation, but religious life continued to sex and gender them in particular ways.

The women’s expectations of religious life and the reality of its repressive structure in the pre-Vatican II period need to be reconciled. In a subsequent chapter, religious life will be examined more closely in relation to the women’s religious identity and how they constructed and negotiated that identity within and against the pre-Vatican regime but it seems necessary here to focus on what the women got out of religious life *as women*. It should be pointed out that my reading of religious life as in some ways repressive comes from my position as a feminist. The historical context is also relevant. The societies in which these religious congregations existed and, more especially, the society in which the women grew up, placed particular and sometimes elaborate restrictions upon women’s lives that were guarded by Church and society (including by other women).

The women chose to enter religious life – an act of agency in itself – and the accounts of their attraction to religious life emphasised agency. Although remarkably structured and regulated, religious life did present women with opportunities not available to them outside. Moreover, although their bodies were controlled in particular ways, religious life gave the women some autonomy over their own bodies – at least with respect to preventing others from touching or harming it, something marriage, for instance, could not guarantee. In addition, institutional channels were in

place for religious to complain if they were being mistreated and one of the few private correspondences they were allowed was with a priest or bishop (how seriously complaints would have been taken, is, of course, another matter).

Religious life gave women the opportunity to pursue a respectable alternative path to marriage and motherhood, one which gave them the opportunity to be educated, receive training, work and travel.²⁴ It did not, however, give them the opportunity to transcend the limits of their gender. In fact, there was little space under the pre-Vatican II regime to negotiate or question the form of womanhood the women were expected to take on. However, that is not to say that they did not invest in it. Elaine talked about the protection women religious needed from ‘human frailty’, while Margaret admitted in retrospect that she had ‘took on the prevailing attitude of the inferiority of women’.

VATICAN II AND THE POST-VATICAN II PERIOD

The changes of Vatican II dismantled over time the very scripted and prescriptive nature of religious life and gave women the space in which to reconsider their role and identity as religious – and as women. Many of the women described Vatican II as a ‘revolution’.²⁵ For some, the revolution was gendered. Frances defined Vatican II as the means by which she ‘became a woman’. Significantly, Vatican II gave the women an opportunity to claim a more positive identity as women, something Margaret (for example) had ‘denied for so long’ (see quote above). Indeed, for her, this was the

‘most important’ thing about Vatican II ‘and [now] that’s what I value most, is my womanhood’.

Congregations and the individual women within them responded differently to Vatican II. Some women felt their congregation moved too fast and individually tried to hold on to what they believed to be the ‘essence’ of religious life. Others would have liked their congregation to respond more quickly. Although no clear pattern emerged from the women’s accounts (some older women were more enthusiastic about the changes than younger women; women in more ‘traditional’ congregations could be quite reformist in their views) it is true that some congregations were more liberal than others and this gave the women in them greater space to re-negotiate religious life, and gendered identity, on a personal as well as congregational level. The ways in which the women of this study renegotiated their identity as women is explored in this section.

Re-Naming

After Vatican II, many congregations gave women the opportunity to revert to their baptismal name. Of the twenty-one women in this study, sixteen reverted to their secular names, three chose to keep their name in religious and two were obliged by their congregation to do so. Reverting to the baptismal name reconnected the women to their birth family (and place) and their secular selves, the gendered person they had been expected to repress. *This required them to think fundamentally about their self-identity and who they were.*

The Habit

Although the more simple habit introduced after Vatican II was less cumbersome and less likely to completely hide the female form, it continued to distinguish religious from secular women and emphasise their identity as religious. When the opportunity arose, many of the women chose to abandon their habit altogether. The predominant reason given for this was the desire to 'fit in' but it also gave women some space in which to express a female self-identity. Teresa was 'absolutely delighted' about changing into secular dress because 'it made me feel [like] a woman'.²⁶

Modern rule books make far fewer references to the female body and there seems to be less shame surrounding it.²⁷ This allows the women to think about themselves and their bodies in new ways. Prior to Vatican II, attention to the body would have been seen as vanity, in conflict with the principle of humility, but during the interviews several of the women commented on their appearance to me. Irene remarked on the size of her hips (getting bigger, a bad thing), while Margaret talked about the possibility of getting a perm. Lilian apologised for wearing casual jeans and jumper when we met for our second interview (I was in a dress) and mentioned it again during the interview, remarking 'the state of me now! I mean, I'm not even respectable!'. Skeggs has shown how respectability is fundamentally a mechanism of class but one that is central too to notions and representations of femininity (Skeggs, 1997:2). Although these comments were made casually during the course of our conversations, they revealed an investment in femininity not possible, or necessary, previously. The

opportunity to make such an investment was something many of the women valued as a means of positively repositioning themselves as women, as the following comment from Teresa suggests:

I was aware of some liberation around myself as a woman, you know? I [had] missed the things ...like clothes, like perfume, like hair-dos. All of that [was] part of the sacrifice [of the pre-Vatican II regime], to give all that up, you know? but ...there has been, over the last X number of years, [the opportunity] to re-claim that sense of care for myself as a woman and ...the femininity bit of me.

Claiming an Identity as Women

During the course of the interviews, most of the women were asked which of the terms ‘woman’ ‘sister/nun’ and ‘Irish’ they would privilege or shy away from using in identifying themselves.²⁸ For some women (Frances, Josephine, Lilian, Joan, and Irene), the titles ‘religious’ and ‘woman’ were of equal importance: ‘being a woman, being a religious ...would [both] be very high ...sort of a level pegging’ (Joan). Claiming an identity as a woman alongside that of a religious demonstrated a re-negotiation of ‘nun/sister’ as a complete or total identity in itself. However, the women were aware that claiming an identity as a woman was contested by others.²⁹

I find it a little bit irksome ...that I am not accepted just as a woman. There are ...snide [or] jokey ...ways of talking about ‘this sister’ ...You’re treated as though you haven’t quite got the hang of what Women’s Lib is, that you haven’t got the right kind of insights. [Frances]

The freedom to claim an identity as a woman depends upon others recognising you as legitimately belonging to that category, which is itself dependent upon the particular definition or meanings ascribed to it. Regarded as ‘passive’ (Lilian) and ‘old-fashioned’ (Teresa), the women felt excluded from ‘womanhood’ by others. Most especially, this focused on their sexuality, suggesting an inextricable relationship

between femininity, heterosexuality, sex and gender. Lilian found that others would not ‘even give you the opportunity to be [a woman] ...People [only] associate us with repression, denial of who we are, of our sexuality’.

Some women (Geraldine, Teresa, Sarah, Vera, Margaret and Catherine) chose to privilege their identity as women above that of sister, often because of the way they felt positioned as religious by others:

The sister comes out on top – that’s the way people perceive me principally ...and *then* Irish and *then* a woman! [But] I put woman first ...Irish second and sister *third*!
[Geraldine]

Indeed, such were the particular notions applied to religious life that some women chose to hide this identity altogether (this will be explored further in chapter six). There were women, however, who continued to privilege their identity as a nun, subsuming their identity as a woman within this.³⁰ The way the women used the terms ‘woman’ and ‘sister/nun’ (and their plural equivalent) in speech mirrored this. Those who claimed an identity as ‘women’ tended to use this term interchangeably with ‘sister/nun’ when referring to themselves or others in religious life (although some did not use the term nun at all) while those who did not claim an identity as women tended only to use the term ‘nun’ or ‘sister’ and not ‘woman’.

Collective Gendered Identities

Vatican II gave many of the women the opportunity to work in new areas of employment and some chose to work specifically with other women.³¹ Their desire to work with women often reflected a gender-based collective identity. Josephine

referred to herself and the other members of a local women's group she was involved with who were not religious as 'us' or 'we', making no distinction between herself as a religious and them as seculars. Margaret found working as a therapist with women 'very satisfying' because 'I understand women better, obviously, [because] I'm a woman myself'. For her, a collective gendered identity was based on a shared experience of patriarchy and she defined her work in terms of women's empowerment:

I particularly want to work with women and for women ...I think women get an awfully raw deal, [they're] discriminated against, they're set aside. And I know what that feels like because I feel that, as a woman, I've been discriminated against in the Church ...I can get angry about that ...it's something I know about. So I suppose from that point of view, that's why I want to work with women. Even though [therapy] isn't consciousness raising, not overtly anyway, it is helping women to get some insight into their own situation and take some control over it.

Sarah expressed similar sentiments when describing her work in female adult education classes as advancing the 'liberation' and 'empowerment' of women.

Josephine formed gender-based communities with other Irish women she knew in England (not religious, some not Catholic) while both Vera and Margaret used gender as the means to transcend ethnic boundaries. Vera abandoned the title 'Irish' in preference for 'cosmopolitan ...professional woman' while Margaret preferred to think of herself as belonging to the 'human family' rather than being 'just' Irish. She qualified this with the following statement, which echoed Virginia Woolf's remark that 'as a woman, I have no country' (1938:125):

We have an awful lot in common ...especially women ...it's like belonging to the woman family! ...Because I associate with women naturally, it's like, yeah, belonging to this human, feminine group. And we all have the same difficulties and struggles. It's kind of universal.

Some women did not form connections outside religious life, remaining as Elaine put it ‘very much what I was [with no] need to ...strike out for a different type of life’. However, they continued to have a collective gender-based identity with other religious.

Sexual Identities

Since Vatican II, the Church’s teaching on sexuality and religious life has changed and the Church now recognises that religious are not a-sexual, enabling women religious to claim a sexual identity for themselves.³² Some of the women did so in the interviews. Margaret called religious ‘sexual beings, like everyone else’ while Lilian described herself as a ‘perfectly normal heterosexual woman’. These women presented their celibacy as a sexuality of choice, not denial – something that was reflected in a number of the modern rule books which tended to place far less emphasis on the ‘dangers’ of sexuality. Some publications made clear the importance of discussing sexuality for religious, including any difficulties they might be experiencing with their vow of celibacy.

It was changes in the Church’s teaching that had given the women an opportunity to claim a sexual identity but some of the women expressed views about sexuality that were at odds with the Church’s official line. Lilian described a friend’s lesbian relationship as ‘perfectly natural’ while Rebecca disagreed strongly with the Church’s attitude to contraception, remarking ‘I feel the church needs to move on [but] I think if I said all I feel, I would be excommunicated!’.

Feminist Identities

The desire to renegotiate their identity as women and occupy the category 'woman' differently, as some of the women clearly have, suggests a consciousness as women, if not feminists. Only two of the women claimed this title themselves: Margaret called herself a feminist, while Pauline defined herself as a Christian feminist.³³ It was clear, however, that the women were aware of feminist ideology and used terms popularised by feminism, such as 'patriarchy' (Lilian), 'female subservience' (Frances) and 'women's liberation' (Frances, Teresa and Sarah) to talk about their own experiences. Indeed, many of the women drew attention to the pioneering work of women's religious congregations in the areas of education, health and social work and emphasised that the strict pre-Vatican II regime was anathema to the original ideals of active female religious congregations. As Pauline put it, 'by the time I entered [in 1948] ...we were very obedient [but] religious aren't meant to be that kind of person at all'. Although Annette did not describe herself as a feminist, she was very proud that nuns had been responsible for the education of 'very feminist' women such as Germaine Greer and Benazir Bhutto. A woman-centred consciousness (if not a feminist consciousness) is discernible at an institutional level too. A publication by the St. Mildred congregation, based on a recent Chapter, made several references to the commitment of the congregation to women's issues and the empowerment of women. Frances and Lilian talked about their exclusion from the category 'woman' specifically because, as religious, they were not seen to be familiar or concerned with

patriarchy or the liberation of women. It seems likely, therefore, that a feminist identity was also one questioned by others.

Certain tenets of feminism, such as the valuing of the female experience and notions of gender equality have impacted upon religious life in the post-Vatican period and have given women in religious life, perhaps no matter the extent to which they agreed with Vatican II, the opportunity to see their femaleness in more positive terms. In giving them greater freedom to be women, and greater responsibilities for themselves as women ('to make choices ...as a woman rather than just being subservient' (Teresa)), Vatican II has effectively recognised and acknowledged the capabilities of women more and enabled women to 'craft', to borrow Kondo's phrase (1990), their gendered self in its wake.

Although the focus of this chapter has been gendered identity, this cannot easily be separated from other forms of identity to be explored in subsequent chapters. Catholicism and religious identity, which are the focus of the next chapter, influenced greatly the modes of gendered identity available to, negotiated and inhabited by the women of this study. In addition, both gender and religious identity have influenced the women's *migrant identities*. Although it has been necessary, given the broad scope and time scale of this study, to focus specifically on gender in this chapter, the interconnections between identities will be returned to in subsequent chapters and explored in more detail in chapter eight.

CONCLUSION

The women of this study were clearly aware of the gendered nature of the society in which they grew up and their own position in it as girls. They were equally aware of the limitations placed upon them as women in the context of their times and the expectations upon them to become wives and mothers. Nuns provided an important alternative role model for them in making the decision not to follow that path. Though positioned as passive victims of the patriarchy of Church and state, these women presented their entry into religious life in very different terms, emphasising their own agency and illustrating that they had very clear notions as to what religious life would offer them as women and individuals – including opportunities to be educated, work and travel. In making choices about which order to join, their accounts showed that they distinguished between congregations and religious.

The structure of religious life under the pre-Vatican II regime was designed to form the women in particular ways and this chapter has illustrated the gendered nature of this. As mentally inferior and latently sexual, there was a certain shame attached to womanhood in religious life and the women were expected to keep themselves in check through a strict regime of denial, especially of femininity. Although there was little space during this period to question or negotiate gendered identity, this is not to say the women were unfulfilled or, indeed, that they rejected the particular prescription of pre-Vatican II religious womanhood. Vatican II has allowed the women to re-negotiate their gendered identity with a freedom they were perhaps never entitled to, either under the pre-Vatican II regime or before it. Most especially, it has

overturned to some extent the negative associations of womanhood within religious life and allowed for femaleness to be regarded in more positive terms, at least by the women themselves if not the institution of the Catholic Church more generally. In several ways – including through their appearance, in the work they do, and by claiming sexual or feminist identities – the women have redefined their sense of themselves as women, although their entitlement to asserting such an identity has been contested by others.

A theme that has run throughout this chapter has been the women's relationship to and negotiation of the organising, gendered structures under which they have lived in – be that the Irish society in which they grew up or the religious communities into which they entered. Both pre-entry and post-Vatican II, the women were shown to actively negotiate their gendered identity, although there was less room to do so under the pre-Vatican II regime. Negotiation will continue to form an important theme in the following chapter, which will focus on religious identity.

¹ Some of these places were not even associated with missionary projects in the 'third world'.

² Vera was the only woman not to have been educated by nuns.

³ Canon law, the law of the Catholic Church, was officially approved in 1580, although it was first codified in 1917 (Collinge, 1997:84). Initially, the development of 'active' orders had radically modified the traditional monastic model of religious life although many restrictions were re-imposed in 1917 (Wittberg, 1994:40) and it was this restrictive system under which the women of this study lived for large parts of their lives. Canon law was revised in 1983 as a consequence of Vatican II (McBrien, 1989:220).

⁴ With the exception of Bernadette's mother who took on paid employment only after her husband died.

⁵ While nun's habits made a big impression on the women as girls, none of them mentioned their mother's appearance, with the exception of Elaine who remarked that her mother's clothes would be 'dripping with sweat' after walking the few miles to Mass with arthritis.

⁶ Of course, vocations involved 'losing' daughters to religious life and there were both practical and emotional losses to be faced (including the possibility of grandchildren). However, daughters were generally 'lost' – in marriage to other families or through migration. Some of the women's parents lamented the loss of their daughter's domestic support while others found the prospect of separation difficult to take (Hannah's father 'never got over my leaving', for example). The sacrifice parents made on their daughter's behalf, however, should also be seen in the context of a society in which sacrifice

was a virtue. Whatever their reservations, therefore, the majority of the families recognised religious life as a noble pursuit and did not stand in its way.

⁷ Under instruction from her mother, Elaine prayed ('three Hail Mary's a day') for her 'purity' although she was never exactly sure at the time what she was praying for. Inglis argues that the Catholic Church in Ireland developed a monopoly on the subject of sex, leaving the laity with 'no communicative competence' to discuss it for themselves (1998:139, 156). The euphemistic language used by Elaine's mother, as well as her own ignorance over what she was praying for, seems to reflect this.

⁸ The women were not under the impression that missionary work would be easy, however. Indeed, tribulation was part of the appeal, but they could have no conception of the actual realities of missionary life and were thus able to project their fantasies upon it instead.

⁹ Fr. Damien was a missionary priest who contracted leprosy, died in 1889 and was subsequently martyred. St. Teresa died of T.B. in 1897 at the age of 24. Her ill health had prevented her from going on the missions but she was canonised in 1925 and declared patroness of the Missions in 1927 (Farmer, 1997)

¹⁰ It also gave the women the opportunity to study less traditional subjects such as maths or science. However, this should not be overstated. Religious were instructed in training/work according to the needs of the congregation, as much as individual ability. In fact, as Catherine would later find out, eagerness to pursue a particular career path could be seen as going against the principle of humility and closed down as a result.

¹¹ Again, I would be reluctant to overstate the freedom women would have had to pursue their own career paths. In the pre-Vatican II period (and to a certain extent today), religious were told what training they would do and where they would work. As Norah put it 'you couldn't [choose what to study]. It wasn't easy to do what you wanted' (of course, however, the fact that they were able to study in the first place was itself an opportunity many would not have had otherwise.) Moreover, this system might not have been fully known by the women before entry. Congregations could offer possibilities but not guarantees. Certainly, however, the work of specific congregations informed the women's choice of convent.

¹² This is a quote from Annette's book, *No Faith in the System* (1995:15)

¹³ And to the received wisdom in Irish society that women entered religious life to avoid ending up as spinsters (MacCurtain, 1995:58).

¹⁴ In addition to Pauline, four of the women did spend time on the missions. Their experiences will be explored in chapter 7.

¹⁵ Of these four, three had been at boarding school, which helped form a close relationship between themselves and the congregations they entered.

¹⁶ Excluding the four women who entered congregations they were taught by, seven (Annette, Bernadette, Catherine, Elaine, Geraldine, Hannah and Kate) were educated by the Mercy's, two (Josephine and Lilian) by the Presentation Order (another Irish congregation set up in 1775 by Nano Nagle to teach poorer Catholics (Kirby, 1984:57)), Irene by the Loreto and Anne by the Dominicans. Vera did not attend convent school. It was not clear which convent school the remaining five women had attended.

¹⁷ The exception's was Bernadette's attraction to nursing and Catherine's to working with children.

¹⁸ Although often written by priests and based on the work of men, it was women (the superior and her council) who implemented the rules and women (religious themselves) who chose to live by them.

¹⁹ Indeed, religious life was organised by gender: women lived apart from men especially, said prayers and read scripture particular to their sex and were refused the sacrament of priesthood.

²⁰ All the rule books I have read made numerous references to purity and perfection. It was unclear if a state of complete purity/perfection could be achieved in this world, although striving was the point.

²¹ The Divine Office refers to the liturgical prayers of the Church, consisting mainly of psalms, biblical canticles, hymns and reading, adapted to particular times of the day. The Little Office was an abridged version of the common office which women religious were bound to keep according to the constitution of their congregation (McBrien, 1995:772; Collinge, 1997:195).

²² Of course, external 'cleanliness' was to be achieved without indulgence or vanity. Katherine Armstrong gives a vivid account of her first encounter as a religious novice with the carbolic soap she would henceforth be using to wash herself (Armstrong, 1981:87).

²³ Even though, as Beale notes, officially the Catholic Church considered religious to be a-sexual (1987:174).

²⁴ Though they were not necessarily relieved of domestic work. Some congregations did not have lay sisters to do domestic work and sisters would have been expected to do this in addition to their professional duties. Most congregations dispensed with the lay sister category in the 1950s or 1960s.

²⁵ 'Revolution' suggests a more sudden change than that which probably occurred. However, the possibility of change might itself have been considered in this way. In addition, when the interviews took place, thirty years had lapsed since Vatican II. By this time, religious life had changed beyond recognition for many, allowing them to retrospectively describe its effects as revolutionary.

²⁶ Some women chose to mix the habit with secular dress, for instance wearing a veil with secular dress or choosing to wear navy clothes that resembled a habit. In this way they claimed an identity as nun and woman.

²⁷ The exception is the St. Cecile modern rule book which seems to have changed little from the pre-Vatican II period. St. Cecile sisters are still required to wear the habit.

²⁸ Four women (Norah, Eileen, Pauline and Rebecca) were not asked this question. The women were also invited to offer terms themselves.

²⁹ This was especially the case in Ireland, which will be explored in further detail in chapter 8.

³⁰ This was true of Annette, May, Kate, Hannah, Bernadette and Elaine.

³¹ Sarah, Josephine, Eileen, Pauline and Margaret each worked on gender-based projects while Lilian, Norah, and Teresa expressed a desire to do so.

³² Geraldine mentioned the existence of workshops and courses within her own congregation designed to help its members come to terms with their sexuality or even just talk openly about it.

³³ However, as the women were not asked if they would identify with the term, it is impossible to guess how many of them would choose to do so.

Chapter 6: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

Throughout their lives, religion – specifically Catholicism – has greatly influenced the women of this study. More interesting perhaps, however, is the different forms that their religious identity has taken and the different ways in which Catholicism (and later, religious life) might be said to form, shape and prescribe their sense of self. Its shifting focus from something that was experienced as a ‘natural’ part of the self, to an identity that had to subsume all others into itself, to one that was re-constituted again in the post-Vatican II period gives some indication of the potential fluidity of identities and the complex relationships that they can form with notions of ‘the self’.

In this chapter, I explore the various forms of religious identity held by the women of this study during three periods of their lives: as they were growing up in a Catholic-influenced Irish state, in religious life under the pre-Vatican II regime and in religious life in the post-Vatican II period. The first section examines the associations the women made with Catholicism – of family and nation as well as pleasure and hardship – to explore how the women developed their attraction to pursuing a life in religious. It questions Catholicism as something ‘innate’, identifying, in fact, the processes of religious learning that the women of this study underwent as girls and young women.

The chapter then moves on to explore the consequences of entering the rule-bound structure of the pre-Vatican II regime on the women’s sense of ‘natural’ Catholicism.

Drawing on the women's accounts and rule books from the period, I examine in more detail than before the particular dynamics of this regime, not only 'the rule' itself but the principle of obedience upon which it depended and the women's response to this. Their obedience, disobedience, agency and resistance are focused upon to consider the extent to which religious life was a total or totalising identity.

In the final section, Vatican II is once again highlighted as a key moment in the women's lives, a means and process by which they formulate a sense of self. This section shows how the greater freedoms of Vatican II enabled women to negotiate and reformulate their religious identity with respect to the terms, modes and methods they used previously, and explores some of the difficulties that have developed in tandem. Throughout the chapter, the role of the women themselves in constructing their own sense of self will be focused upon, revealing even in the most rigid of structures the complexity of identity as a site of negotiation.

GROWING UP

The importance of Catholicism in Irish society during the period in which the women of this study were born and grew up (between the 1910s and 1960s) has been well documented (Donnelly, 2000; Inglis, 1998; Whyte, 1984; see also chapter four). The women grew up surrounded by Catholicism – at home, at school and in society. Bernadette talked about the 'religious atmosphere' that existed within Irish society while Geraldine remarked that Catholicism was 'part of the environment [and] community I was reared in'. It was equally clear that Catholicism was of great significance in the women's

lives. It 'meant everything' to Elaine and May, was 'vital' to Kate and was 'a way of life' for Irene. Often, the women used organic terms to talk about Catholicism, suggesting not only that they were surrounded by it but that they were imbued with it, that it was something intrinsic to them. As Elaine put it, 'it was natural, a part of you'.

Catholicism and National Identity

For many of the women, Catholicism was fundamentally about being Irish. Hannah, Lilian and Kate talked about being raised as a 'traditional Irish Catholic', Irene spoke of growing up in the 'good old-fashioned Irish faith', Elaine in the 'traditional Irish faith'. Using the terms Catholic and Irish interchangeably suggested that the women made no clear distinction between the two. In some quotes the nation itself was invoked, intimating a 'natural' link between Catholicism and the island of Ireland. May described Catholicism as 'absolutely embedded in the country' while in the following quote, Kate makes a connection between Catholicism and nature:

Prayer ...and God was part of the warp and weft of everybody's life, especially in the country 'cause you depended on God for fine weather, for everything ... You didn't want [farm animals] to die because that was money lost and you prayed to God for them to get better and so on.

In revealing this more dependent relationship, it was as though the land itself might be considered to be Catholic.

In fact, Catholicism in the period the women were talking about and in the form they understood and practised it had been a 'tradition' in Ireland for less than half a century (chapter four). The established discourse of Irish Catholicism as a 'tradition', however,

represented the success of the Catholic Church in establishing Catholicism as a fundamental part of Irish national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as one of the building-blocks of the post-independent state. By the time the women of this study were growing up, Catholicism had become more than an element of national identity but worked in a similar way to it, binding the nation together and drawing boundaries between who belonged within it and who remained outside it. The women situated their religion in the context of a society in which everyone was constructed as the same. Josephine remarked that her family was 'like everybody else in the street'. Similarly, Catherine commented that her family was 'like most Irish families, most Irish households'.

Catholicism was practised in very specific, ritualistic, often public ways which gave a certain rhythm to the women's lives: rosary every evening, Mass daily or on Sundays, fasting on Fridays, confession once a month, and so on. In addition to conforming to this pattern themselves, the women were aware of others practising their religion in the same way. This created a sense of community which was both real (local) as Josephine's quote suggests and 'imagined' (national) as Catherine's does (Anderson, 1991).

Irish Catholicism also existed in opposition to what it was not, primarily English Protestantism but also other forms of non-Catholicism. There was an awareness of non-Catholics only as 'the other', whether they be the 'heathens' that Irish missionaries were abroad 'saving', English Protestants in England or the minority Protestant population of Ireland. As Hannah remarked:

There were very few non-Catholics in the surrounding [area but] you could tell who were the Catholics when the Angeles¹ went ...the funny thing is you remember and you were *conscious* of it.

The demography of Catholics in Ireland, as well as social class, could, however, disrupt the assumed division between ‘Irish Catholics’ and ‘the rest’. Growing up in Derry, Margaret was aware from a young age of her own positioning as ‘other’ in relation to the ruling Protestant class. Rebecca grew up as a Catholic in Northern Ireland also – in the majority-Protestant county of Tyrone. Her elevated social class position, however, distinguished her from local Catholics, leading to a greater sense of community with the Protestant elite. Although living in the Free State/Republic, Vera’s social position (firmly middle-class) also distinguished her from ‘traditional, Irish Catholics’, something she seemed keen for me to be aware of. While ‘traditional, Irish Catholic’ was a term the women used freely and frequently and one that I understood myself, it was both a more recent and less stable category than its common usage suggested.

Catholicism and the Family

Catholicism was also integral to the women’s experience of family life. Indeed, the family cannot easily be separated from notions of Irish national identity: the (Catholic) family was established as the basic unit of Irish society and was enshrined in the Constitution of 1937. As we have seen in chapter five, Catholic ideology could be reflected in family size and many of the women found it difficult to separate the family from Catholicism. Catherine was not the only woman to remark that Catholicism was ‘important because it was important to my family’.

Religion was something the family *did* together – through the rituals of prayer, Mass and so on: '[our family] met together and said morning and evening prayers' (Bernadette). While religion was deemed to unite the nation on a macro level, it was also understood to join the family together on a micro level. If, as Inglis suggests was the case (1998:60,190), Irish society segregated the sexes to such an extent that even when married men and women lived largely independent lives, meeting for prayer could have been an important way in which the family came together as a family. For Bernadette, prayer became especially significant after her family was forced to separate following the death of her father. When the remaining members met during school holidays, one of the things they did together was pray. This served to verify that they were still a family, though they lived apart.

Religion could also re-connect women to their family after they left home. Frances moved to boarding school in England at the age of ten, and used Catholicism as the essential 'lynchpin' between 'spotty' Liverpool and home (her words). Training as a nurse in Dublin, Elaine felt 'lonely for home' and out of sorts with her fellow students whose preferred forms of entertainment ('ballet and the pictures') were quite different to her own ('Irish dancing'). She sought refuge in the Church, eventually developing a vocation for religious life. For these women, religion was a staple in their lives and served to re-connect them with notions of home, as well as feelings of belonging – being *at* home.

Although the women described their religion as something 'innate' and 'natural', the patterns and ritual associated with it had, in fact, to be learned – usually, in the first instance, in the home. The women were generally able to identify the importance of their

parents in this regard. While the practise of Catholicism could be said to bring the family together, there were distinct gendered roles that women and men took on as mothers and fathers in passing religion on to their children. Moreover, although male and female children were taught together, they would likely have recognised the different roles they would eventually be expected to inherit as adults. Predominantly for the women of this study, it was mothers who were in charge of passing on the rituals of devotional religion to their children. Several of the women remarked that it was their mother's job more than their father's to physically organise them for prayers, lead them in the rosary, prepare them for Mass and so on. Norah suggested that religion was matrilineal when she remarked that 'the mother hands on an awful lot of the faith in the home ... That's where I got my own faith really, from my mother and grandmother'. Likewise, Bernadette had learned her religion 'at my mother's knee', a common phrase in Catholic social teaching.²

However, while it was their mother's responsibility to pass on the *rituals* of Catholicism, this is not to say that religion was unimportant to their fathers. It could, in fact, be equally if not more important to fathers that the religion was passed on, although the *role* they played in this was often very different to that of their wives:

My mother led us [in prayer] but my father was the one to whom it mattered most. It mattered to him a lot that this rosary was said but he wouldn't lead it. It was her role to lead it. [Geraldine]

While fathers could impress upon their children the importance of religion, it was mothers who took on the more practical job of actually organising and teaching them. Geraldine's father's role was, as she later put it, to 'inspire' the family and this seemed quite a common responsibility for fathers to take on. While they were bound by the rules and

obligations of Catholicism themselves, fathers tended not take on the extra burden of teaching their off-spring.

Inglis (1998) has made much of the special relationship that existed between the Catholic Church and Irish mothers and explored the manner in which this special role as religious educator within the home was established and maintained (see also Fahy, 1987:28). The women's testimonies confirm that mothers and fathers had distinct roles in this regard but not (as Inglis' work might be taken to suggest) that women were more 'religious' figures than men. They were, however, associated with a different form and interpretation of religion.³ Mothers were associated with the serious business of rituals, while fathers were more 'spiritual', a term used by many of the women to describe their father. 'Spiritual' suggests otherworldly, ethereal and more free, in contrast to their mothers whom they associated with the more man-made, institutional and earth-bound Church, as well as its clearly defined set of rules. As 'teachers', mothers would have had to have been more concerned (and more strict) about this side of religion. The exception was Catherine's mother, whose approach Catherine described as 'more light-hearted', but who was admonished by her husband who felt she should 'give better example to the kids'. As fathers tended to 'join in' rather than organise prayers in the family home, they had to 'work' at religion less, but were not any less associated with it as a result. The only example given of a father taking a more active role came from Geraldine whose father was called upon to recite a particular prayer in October in honour of St. Joseph 'because it was a specialist role!'.

An example of how these different roles worked in practice was given by two women (Kate and Geraldine) in stories they told about their fathers missing Mass on Sunday, but going on Monday 'to make up for it'. Their point was to draw attention to the fear that existed within Irish Catholic culture over missing Mass but served inadvertently to emphasise the freedom men had to make such decisions, choices not available to women who were mothers, with their 'students' to think about.

Importantly, fathers could influence their daughters in matters religious. In the following quote, Josephine sums up the different functions, albeit both effective, that parents assumed:

I suppose my mother had the most influence but my father had the most conscientiseing influence. He was the one who brought in the other side of religion which was [that] you were responsible for the poor ... He would talk to us about that and how people didn't have the basics of life and as Christians you were kind of obliged to look at that too.

A binary is set up between the 'ritualistic' mother and the father's 'spirituality'. Although mothers were religious, they were not deemed to reach the 'deep spirituality' of their husbands.⁴ Their father's interpretation of religion was also more attractive than the ritual and pedagogy that was associated with their mother's religion – another 'job' of marriage and motherhood. Indeed, the women's religious vocation and the mystery associated with it may have enabled them to identify more with their father's 'deeper' spirituality.

Catholicism and the Pleasure/Pain Binary

Catholicism was described by the women of this study as a religion of hardship and fear, but also one that could be comforting and associated with pleasure. These conflicting

discourses often co-existed around the one experience. For example, Elaine vividly described the arduousness of growing up in rural Irish life and talked about the great difficulty of trying to conform to the obligations of Catholicism when the Church was a three-mile walk distance and her mother was crippled with arthritis. Despite this, however, there was 'nothing else ...that gave you so much consolation at the time but your religion'. It was in the harshness of religion that the reward was seen to lie, while the pain was a source of strength.

Religion was also based on fear, of hell predominantly but also of the imposing figure of the Priest and the authority of the Church. As Vera remarked, 'we had ...Archbishop McQuaid⁵ who was similar to Pope Pius XII⁶ and between them, you were indoctrinated to such an extent ...that you could only think one way'. The Church and its priests were powerful figures in Irish society, whose authority the women would have had little space to question. Indeed, some of the women were 'encouraged' by priests in their religious vocation, either to enter religious life itself or in their choice of congregation. Remarking on priests' influence in this regard, Elaine said 'that just shows you how ...we were brought up! To reverence authority in the people who had [it]'.⁷

It was the Church's authority that made it a fearful institution, which was partly based on the divine knowledge it had and administered about what might happen to those who did not conform to its teachings. This was, according to Frances, 'drummed into us'. May was especially worried not about this life, but the next: 'you wouldn't miss Mass for fear that you would be knocked down in the street and down you went to hell ...I was brought up on a religion of fear but it meant a lot to me'. The elevated status of the Church as well

as its otherworldly authority meant a certain wonder and mystery was attached to it and May described herself as being 'in awe' of it.⁸ As these women's stories suggest, although fearful and associated with hardship, Catholicism was also attractive, appealing and comforting.

Religion was also to be celebrated, however, and was associated with the festivities and excitement of Christmas and Easter. It could also be the source of family or domestic revelry. Both Frances and Joan remarked upon the sense of occasion that accompanied a relative priest's visit to the home to say Mass. For Frances, the rewards were spiritual: 'there was something very intimate about having ...the most sacred moment of religion just for the family'. Rewards were also material, however, involving large family gatherings and a great feast.

That religion could be something very special was illustrated by Elaine, reminiscing about her first holy communion. Although this event had taken place close to seventy years before our interview, she was able to describe the 'candle and nice flowers' that she had held during the procession. It was clear that receiving communion had been a significant event, requiring memorable preparation. Elaine recalled that 'you had to be washed ...your chest ...your back ...your feet and hands. It was an outward sign of the wonder of what you were receiving'. The cleanliness associated with preparing for this event contrasted significantly with the day-to-day drudgery of the life she described on the family farm.

In addition, Catholicism was associated with social events outside the home and fraternising with friends. Josephine recalled going to mass – as well as ‘skiv[ing] off Holy Hour⁹ on a Sunday night’ – in the 1960s. Likewise, Geraldine:

When I think back to my youth, our entertainment was sort of going to the Holy Hour. We wouldn't [have] thought of saying “[I'm] going to the cinema” but if I could say “I'm going to holy hour”, it got you into town. [Religion] was socially *right*.

These positive associations – even of hardship – that the women made around Catholicism as they were growing up helped influence the sense of religious identity they developed and shape their attraction to pursuing a religious life. Moreover, though it would be impossible to identify the precise connection between the strength of Catholicism in Ireland and the large number of religious vocations from Irish people, it seems fair to propose that a relationship existed between the two. Many of the women in this study connected their vocation to their societal and familial ‘religious upbringing’ (Bernadette). Indeed, Kate remarked that there was ‘very little chance of a vocation [without] prayer in the home’. In chapter five, I argued that the women's vocations were in part a response to the gendered nature of society and the opportunities that were open or closed to them as women. This cannot be separated, however, from the importance of religion in Irish society and their own religious identity, not least because it ensured that their decision to enter religious life was rarely regarded as controversial.

The type of Catholicism that existed in Ireland during the period the women of this study were growing up was institutional, authoritative and ritualistic. However, this formal institution with its specific rituals and practices was experienced more as an organic culture literally *into which* the women were born. Although the women did learn the

particular conventions and procedures associated with Catholicism, it was an almost unconscious learning. As everyone around them was practising their religion in the same way, it felt 'natural': natural as opposed to constructed; natural as good and wholesome; natural in terms of being intrinsic to the body; and natural to do with land and soil. Catholicism pervaded almost every aspect of their young lives – their home, their school and the community in which they lived. The all-encompassing nature of Irish Catholicism meant that the women's sense of themselves as Catholic could not easily be separated from their sense of self – as Irish, girls, daughters and so on. This apparently easy co-existence and symmetry between different identities was challenged, however, when the women left secular society and entered into religious life.¹⁰

THE PRE-VATICAN II PERIOD

Religious congregations in the pre-Vatican II period were specifically designed to facilitate the transformation of women into nuns through a strictly defined set of rules, penance and labour. There was no distinction made between religious *life* and religious *identity*. 'The rule' prescribed, often in the greatest detail, a particular self-identity and subject position that the women were expected to inhabit, or strive to inhabit, completely and absolutely and at the expense of all other identities. What had previously been experienced as 'innate' and 'natural' (but was not, of course) was transformed into something that had to be learned and constantly performed, and upon which the women would be judged as 'successful' sisters by their superiors, fellow religious and themselves.

Prayers, Work and Daily Routine

Although before they entered the women adhered to the obligations of lay Catholicism through frequent rituals that were carried out even daily, the routine expected of them in religious life was far more onerous. Heavily-laden daily timetables, outlined in the rule book, were considered essential to their formation as religious and represented both a form of protection and control over their bodies and, to a certain extent, their minds. As Annette put it:

It was a fairly busy, full life: ...teaching full-time and we were chars! We were gardeners, we were cooks, we were door-keepers, we were everything! ... You hadn't time [to think], you'd so much work to do.

Typically, prayers and spiritual duties – all prescribed and mostly in common – took up about five hours of the day.¹¹ In addition, the women had their professional commitments as teachers, nurses and so on to attend to, as well as domestic duties. Recreation and mealtimes were also scheduled. From the moment they rose until going to bed, nearly every moment of the women's day was accounted for. The timetable was strictly observed and amending it was no easy task, as the St. Mildred rule book made clear: 'the horarium ... must be the same in all houses, and it must not be changed for light reason or without real necessity' (CSSM:58).

Timetables of prayer and work and adhering to the rule were the basis of religious life and became its very essence – informing the religious identity the women were expected to take on and inhabit. Several of the women could recount their pre-Vatican II daily timetable and recalled in some detail the particular demands that were made upon them, as the following examples from Annette and Frances illustrate:

I'd get up in the morning at half five. A quarter to six, you'd be down in the chapel. You had to say your prayers first and then you made a meditation. Then you had a gap, you had five or ten minutes. Now during that time you could get out and make your bed but I had charge of opening and shutting the [school] gates and all the shutters on the ground floor. Then I'd rush upstairs and get the big mop and mop the corridor before the blessed sacrament would come up to the old sisters, the sick sisters. And then make your bed and [go] down then and get mass. [After breakfast] we had a twenty minutes walk down to school and then when you got down there it was helter-skelter again. [Annette]

There was office in the evening from say 5.30 to six and then there was adoration from six to 6.30 and then there was spiritual reading from 6.30 to seven. I'm not sure of the hours but there was an hour and a half like that. And I can remember kneeling in church just falling asleep after having done a heavy days teaching and no outlet, you know? We had an hours recreation, together, in the middle of the day, if you were free, but you might have duties in the school and the same thing then from eight till nine at night, sitting around a table sewing. [Frances]

Religious life was specifically designed to be full, in order to avoid the 'dangers' of indolence. The St. Louise rule book, for example, stated that 'work, together with obedience and prayer will be the surest safeguard of the mind, while idleness ... begets every vice' (CSSL:125). The work of active nuns was considered particularly dangerous, putting them at risk of 'temptation'. According to Frances, active religious life was deemed inferior to contemplative and, as a result, sisters were expected to fit their working lives into the superior model of the contemplative nun – 'the ideal really' (Frances).

In addition to its taxing timetable, other elements of the pre-Vatican II regime were remembered vividly by the women, including its severity ('when the children went home the heating used to go down and we used to have this real cold [we] had to endure' (Elaine)), demands made on privacy ('you never got away [from others] ... that was the thorn' (Annette)), always having to ask permission ('you had to get permission [for all sorts of] crazy things' (Catherine)) and restrictions on relationships with family. Letters to

and from family – received and sent at most monthly – were read. As Elaine recalled, this limited discussion to ‘the weather and the land’. Likewise Catherine remarked:

All our letters were censored. You had to hand them up open, they had to be read and then your letters were read coming in. People wouldn’t say anything to you except, ‘nice day’, you know? There was no real communication.

For those that were able to return to Ireland for visits home (at most once every six or eight years during this period), staying with family was forbidden. In addition, they were not able to return if family members became ill (‘my mother had a stroke ... she was only a few miles down the road [but] I wasn’t allowed to [visit her]’ (Annette)) or died and some of the women did not see their fathers or mothers again after entering, among them Hannah:

In fact, I never saw [my father] again because he died before I went back to Ireland. Had a heart attack and died and at that time we didn’t go home either, so I didn’t go home for the funeral or anything.

Recalling these incidents to me, as many of the women did, reflected their impact upon the women at the time and in retrospect.

Almost without exception, the women described the pre-Vatican II regime as very difficult, for example Irene: ‘it was very, very difficult. Very hard. I’m not making it sound easy because it wasn’t’. Of course, it was meant to be so and this formed part of its heroic and martyrological appeal. Its arduousness was both a discourse of the regime, as well as part of the experience of it. In fact, given the divine associations of religious life, some were surprised to find that religious life was at all manageable, its demands (if not its aims) more tangible than supernatural.

Referring to the preordination of religious life before Vatican II, Elaine said 'our lives were so laid out for us and we had everything really – our prayer life ...our work life'. Others were more particular, and more critical, in their characterisation. Geraldine, for instance, called it 'institutional', Teresa 'a restricted regime'. Catherine likened it to 'a straight-jacket' while Margaret talked of the women having 'absolutely no freedom'. Frances recalled the '*terrible* strain', describing the system as 'a kind of indoctrination ...[and] military discipline'. These were, of course, retrospective judgements. At the time, the women had, as Irene and so many others put it, 'accepted it'. Such was the frequency of this phrase, in fact, it was an important theme that ran throughout their accounts.

Only Vera had suggested any equivocation when she remarked that she 'accepted things [but] accepted them reluctantly'. On the one hand, the women accepted the regime because 'when canon law says [something], you kind of accept it' (Frances) as 'the way to holiness and the way to God and the way to everything' (Lilian) but equally because 'you never questioned *anything* and you were never given any encouragement to' (Frances). Indeed, obedience was both the corner-stone of religious life and the mechanism on which it depended. It was also something developed in the women as they were growing up: in school, at home and in society.

Obedience and Authority

Frances described obedience as 'spelled out' in religious life and this was certainly the case in the rule books. For example, religious were expected to obey their superior

‘completely, promptly, courageously ...and without resistance’ [CSSN:53] ‘even if it be difficult and repugnant to nature’ [CSSM:20]. Many of the women repeated rules specific to obedience in the interviews – some verbatim. Moreover, most recalled their response to the pre-Vatican II regime in terms of their own obedience to it. For example, Pauline commented that ‘we did what we were told to do, we were very obedient’. Likewise Frances ‘did what I was told, it never even crossed my mind not to’.

In addition, however, some of the women talked about bending or breaking the rules – drawing attention to their *disobedience*.¹² Irene and Catherine mentioned the ‘sign-language’ that was developed to aid clandestine communication, while Joan recalled her own attempts to ‘break the rules left, right and centre’. Certainly, it seems unlikely that Annette was the only woman to recognise that the system could be manipulated: ‘if you said you liked something, you got the opposite [but] you could work the system if you wanted to’.

If caught breaking the rule, however, there were penalties to be faced and Catherine was ‘always getting into trouble, *always*’. Publicly questioning the rule was also severely disciplined. Vera’s noviciate was extended for this reason: ‘I kept saying “this is contrary to reason!” [and] got six months extra for my disobedience’. Of course, if women were found to be breaking the rule frequently enough, or if they seemed to truly disagree with the pre-Vatican II regime, they could also be expelled. In acts of resistance such as these, however, these women challenged (however subtly) the ‘scripted’ identity (Goffman, 1959) they were expected to perform in religious life. Although not a rejection of religious life, in a small way, their resistance represented a renegotiation of its terms.

The women were expected to recognise their own worthlessness in the face of God and their superior, learning not to trust themselves but submit to the authority of others. As the St. Mildred rule book put, they should be ‘internally resigned ...to renounce their own will and judgement’ (CSSM:20). Much was made of the authority of the superior, which was understood to be based on her possession of knowledge (and, therefore, power). As God’s representative in the congregation, superiors were held to be endowed with a certain knowledge that mere sisters did not have, for example, the most suitable direction for the congregation as a whole or training paths for individual sisters were often decided by the superior. Although she was not the only woman to suggest a connection between the two, when asked about religious life in general Annette remarked that the experience of religious life and the mood of the congregation ‘depended on the superior’, adding, as though to press the point, ‘your superior’s a terribly important post that shouldn’t be given lightly’.

Vitality, it was the superior who decided whom of the novices ‘genuinely’ had a vocation. The power of the superior to expel individuals was great indeed and informed the relational dynamics within the congregation. Most women would not have wanted to displease or, indeed, question a superior’s authority for fear of what the consequences might be for themselves. This was evidenced in several comments made by the women, which revealed their considerable fear of being asked to leave religious life and ‘failing’ as a sister. Geraldine spoke of her ‘relief’ when her superior, disciplining her for not ‘keeping custody of the eye’ as she ate (i.e. looking around her), had not expelled her. When Annette remarked that her ‘big worry from the day I entered, oh, for years! – until I

came over here – was that they’d send me home. I was *terrified!*’, she was talking about a period that amounted to the first eighteen years of her religious life.

Although rule books tended to offer very specific guidelines on how the women should or should not behave, they did not give much practical advice on how to recognise if the state of perfection had been achieved (if, indeed, it could be). Individual religious were not qualified to judge their own religious vocation – this was the job of the superior. Annette’s uncertainty about what ‘made’ a religious led her to question if she really was one herself and she feared her exposure as a ‘fraud’.

Some of the women spoke of the pre-Vatican II system as something that was almost ‘against nature’ and, indeed, Catherine talked about ‘losing [her] naturalness’ as a result. Certainly, it was about replacing what seemed to come naturally with rules and obligations such that these rules might then ‘became the normal thing’ (Elaine). This dependence upon learning suggests an interesting contradiction between religious life as unnatural and the special internal or organic endowment that was the vocation to religious life which can only be resolved by thinking of the vocation as a supernatural (CSSC:60; CSSMa:17) gift which God, not the women, was the source of, and which they needed to protect and safeguard, almost from themselves.

Rewards

Religious life was not, of course, without its rewards. For some, spiritual rewards were found in the structure of the regime itself – one they not only accepted but invested in.

Religious life in the pre-Vatican II period was physically and psychologically demanding. But this was a discourse appropriate to the ideology of religious life which was, as the St. Louise rule book put it, ‘a life of penance and privation’ [CSSL:115]. For Elaine, the reward lay in the harshness of religious life. Recalling its hardship, she said:

I thought ‘if I stick this then really I’ve been called to heaven’ ...The novice mistress used to say ... ‘don’t think you’re giving Our Lord a full service if you’re not so tired that you have to drag yourself up to bed at night’. And you felt like that. You felt very eager to do as much as you possibly could ...There was something in that hard and suffering life that cleaned you interiorly ...and drew you to ...a greater light ...a knowledge of God [and] of yourself.

Others, however, found spirituality almost in spite of the regime:

But all the [same], there was real spiritual richness and although prayer ...was kind of mechanical, just giving time to prayer ...does do something to spiritualise your outlook on life [Frances]

For some, the simple fact of being in their chosen religious congregation was enough.

Ruminating on the difficulty of the pre-Vatican II regime, May remarked:

I expected things to be [hard]. [But] I didn’t mind what they asked me to do. If I was to walk on my head, I didn’t mind, I’d do it ...I loved [the congregation] so much. And I think I’ve loved [it] ever since. Ever since. I’ve never, ever not loved it. *Never*.

Work was an important source of fulfilment for many, and one that could not easily be separated from religious life itself. Not only was work fundamental to being an ‘active nun’, in the pre-Vatican period religious worked within their own institutions, which were very often close if not in the same grounds as the convents in which they lived. When asked if religious life had lived up to her expectations, Hannah replied that it had because ‘I always ...really did enjoy teaching’, revealing, for her at least, an inextricable relationship between religious life and work.¹³

Many of the women also commented on the sororal rewards of religious and community life. Margaret found a 'real joy in being together' while Irene found a 'great peace' in knowing herself and her co-religious were 'all focusing in the one direction ...all in it together'. Given the intensity of 'the rule', small gestures of friendship might have seemed more significant so that, whether the women broke the rules or not, close friendships could be formed. Certainly, friendship was identified by several of the women as a significant part of the rewards of religious life, despite or in spite of the rule. For Joan, it was the pre-Vatican II regime itself that gave rise to a sense of community:

You went home twice in a life time ... You [knew you'd have] your rough days, your rough weeks ...you [knew you'd] get news of a death in the family but [the congregation would] always be there, you know? ...There was that tremendous bonding ...It wasn't found in any books, it wasn't written into any rule but it was a real human, loving, supportive thing that was very, very powerful.

The exception to this experience was Annette, who remarked that communal living was 'the real trial ...of religious life', illustrating that community could be constraining also. Her investment was in the respect she received from those outside religious life: 'I used to go out and ...people [would] salute you and you'd think: I must deserve the salute! I must be able to put with things that are difficult and hard'.

Agency and Passivity

Religious life required 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1975, 135-169), women that were capable of submitting to its strict regime. This was made clear in the rule books, all of which profiled the ideal temperament and characteristics required of aspiring religious. The St. Marie congregation prized 'moral qualities such as judgement, piety, strength of will [and] docility' [CSSMa:17] while the St. Nadine rule book noted that 'those in whom

a taste for singularity is noticed will be carefully excluded' (CSSN:20). Most rule books also identified an ideal age for aspirants, based on the assumed compliance of younger women, for example, 'the age most suitable for admission into the [congregation] is about eighteen. Those who have reached an age at which formed habits would make it difficult to mould them to religious life should not easily be received' (CSSM:156-7).

Elaine described the position of women religious during this period (not unfavourably) as 'guarded by authority, as somebody who had no mind [or] will of your own'. The 'passivity' demanded by absolute obedience sits uneasily with the way the women talked about their attraction to religious life and the way they presented themselves as agents. However, as their accounts of accepting the regime suggest, theirs was an 'active' passivity, one they chose to take on. In effect, they actively produced their own obedience. As Frances put it 'as I say, it was all part of what you took on. You went in with your eyes open'. Although several of the women spoke of responsibility being taken away from them ('you just passed the buck. You just went and asked the Reverend Mother and she had to make the decisions'), at the same time, they were accountable for themselves literally every moment of the day. Their stories of having to be consciously aware of the rule suggests as much.

Indeed, the very existence of convents depended upon individuals choosing to enter into them and remain voluntarily. The technology of government, which was based on authority and surveillance, could succeed only if individuals were willing to submit themselves to it: it was fundamentally also a government of the self, by the self. Although religious life was expressly concerned with the 'death' of the secular self, the self was

vital to its aims which challenges any easy application of passivity. The opportunity in which to exercise agency within convent life was, however, limited – if not distorted. While the women were actively involved in submitting themselves to the pre-Vatican II regime, there was precious little space for them to exercise agency not dictated by that regime.

In his analysis of the production of subjectivity and individuals in society, Foucault (1975) explored methods of discipline and punishment exercised in Western systems of social control such as prisons and the army. Organisationally and structurally, the pre-Vatican II convent is fertile ground for a Foucauldian analysis of power relations. As this research focuses on women religious, not the convents in which they lived, it is beyond the scope of this research to attempt such an analysis. Clearly, however, religious life, as a form of power, subjugated the women even though it was also a system in which they claimed a subjectivity of their own (Foucault in Faubion, 1994:331).

Religious Identity Reconfigured

Rooted as it had been in family, home and Irishness, the religious identity prescribed by religious life was significantly different to the one the women had held prior to entering. In reconfiguring their religious identity, the women changed and adapted the terms and references used to describe it. As this chapter has illustrated, for many, community life itself became an important means of reformulating religious identity.

Communal, religious identity was, in fact, one of the few identities sanctioned by religious life. On entering, women ceased to be individuals and became 'one heart and one soul' (CSSL:118). The women dressed alike, had no personal possessions and a large part of their daily activities were carried out in common:

In the old regime you had your Office at the same time, you got up in the morning, you were all in chapel, said your morning prayer together, you did your half an hour meditation, all sitting in the chapel. Then, I think we had a Mass together, you'd tea-time together, you'd supper together, dinner together ...recreation together ...and all those kind of functions ...at certain times. [Kate]

Family had been an important means by which the women defined and described their religious identity prior to entering. For some, the congregation replaced the family in importance after entering, as, indeed, the rule books demanded. Some women adopted congregational histories as their own. May enquired if I 'kn[ew] about our life?', referring to the history of the St. Mildred congregation, while Bernadette, a member of a nursing community that had originally made home-visits, remarked 'that part of nursing closed down for us so we started having our own hospitals', even though she was referring to a practice that ended before she was born.

Religious were expected to 'cut themselves off' (Frances) or 'deny' (Catherine) their family. Contact between religious and their families was minimal and regulated and few had any expectation of visiting their family more than once or twice in their life time (if at all). Moving immediately from their natal family life to religious life as so many of the women in this study did, it was not surprising that for some the community replaced the family.¹⁴ Irene admitted that ties to her community had replaced those she had felt for her family, especially after her parents had passed away, since which time she had ceased to

visit Ireland with any regularity. Such was the strength of her connection to other members of her congregation who had died, however, that she continued to visit the town where they were buried every year 'just to pray with them and be with them in spirit'. For Irene at least, the connection between herself and her community seemed to transcend the physicality of mortality in a way that was not the case for her family.

Another significant means by which the women talked about being Catholic growing up and which necessarily changed within religious life in England was the connection to Ireland and Irishness. The implications and experience of this will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter on ethnicity, and returned to again in the subsequent chapter on migration. As will be seen in the chapters that follow, ethnicity and migration were significant to the experience of religious life and influenced the religious identity the women formed within it.

Religious life was an apparatus, the structure of which was designed to transform individuals the who entered into it. Although the 'state of perfection' which the women were striving to achieve might have been out of their reach, they were influenced by their attempts to conform to it. Appropriating a congregational identity involved personal modification, adaptation and reformation, if not complete transformation. For Catherine, this was most obvious on her first visit home, by which time she had been a religious for seven years:¹⁵

Everything was strange: my house was strange, my family were strange ...I was moulded by then into ...saying my prayers at a certain time and keeping aloof ...going to bed at a certain time ...I wouldn't spend any money ...wouldn't be late for anything ...I thought to myself I had to do all these things because that was important.

Catherine's personality had been 'moulded' such that the rules and obligations had become, while not second-nature, a defining part of the personality of the self.

In contrast to how the women (mis-)remembered the early socialisation processes by which they had 'became' Catholics in early life, religious life under the pre-Vatican II regime was experienced as a scripted and learned performance: a difficult, conscious, but ultimately rewarding adherence to rules and regulations which governed their form and behaviour for almost every moment of the day. Prior to entering, the women simply 'were' Catholic. They were not, however, 'innately' nuns and had to become them through a process of transformation. A fundamental shift took place in their religious identity after entry whereby, instead of their actions being understood as a *reflection* of what they were (Catholic), their actions *made* them what they were (religious). Another significant change, however, was to occur in the wake of Vatican II, which gave those women who embraced it, the opportunity to renegotiate their religious identity once more and those who did not, the challenge of trying to hold on to a particular interpretation of the 'essence' of religious life.

VATICAN II AND THE POST-VATICAN II PERIOD

While some change had occurred within religious life before Vatican II (for example, many congregations dispensed with the formal distinction between lay and choir sisters), the life was generally, as Elaine put it, 'very constant'. Although not immediate, this began to change in its wake. Vatican II challenged the very basis of religious life as rules and structures that had literally become the faith began to be questioned, debated and

dismantled. Over time, this fundamental shift would have a profound effect on the way the women of this study lived their lives and understood religious life. Through a convoluted process that was faster or slower depending on the congregation and the responses of individual women, religious life became less 'scripted'. Greater space opened up in which to renegotiate religious life and religious identity and there was more scope in which to pursue different identity projects. If not change itself, then the prospect or potential of change began to replace one hundred and fifty years of 'divine' tradition. The subjective understandings and expressions of religious identity by and amongst women religious is an under explored area of research in general, and no more so than in the case of Vatican II.¹⁶ In this section, I examine the impact of Vatican II on the women of this study.

Many women described Vatican II as a process of maturation. Irene, for example, described her acceptance of the pre-Vatican II regime in retrospect as 'almost childlike ...we had a kind of infantile mentality, if you like', the contemporary system as 'much more grown up'. Likewise Frances talked of having 'been living like infants!' while Hannah mentioned that the changes 'made you grow up'. This is not to suggest the transformation was easy, however. Even Frances, who in hindsight felt 'all these constraints [were] really burdensome' and that 'reform was absolutely necessary', experienced Vatican II and its aftermath as 'a very painful process because it's extremely difficult to undo something that has been so sacred'.

One common way the women described the impact of change was in terms of their taking charge, or being made to take charge, of themselves in ways they had not previously had

to. As Hannah put it ‘you have to be much more responsible for yourself. For your prayer life. For a whole lot of things ... we started having personal budgets and [became] more responsible [for] finance’. Responsibility for one’s own prayer life reflected changing work and living arrangements of religious but emphasised also the greater charge the women were being expected to take on for themselves. Kate observed a ‘certain freedom ... you find time for your own prayer. We pray in the evenings together but apart from that, you’re totally free’.

Modern constitutions of religious congregations reflect these changes. In many ways, they are not ‘rule books’ at all, offering instead guidance for women pursuing a life as religious. They are generally shorter and ‘lighter’ documents, less prescriptive and with less emphasis on surveillance. There is also much less focus on the inherent weakness of women and the danger they present to themselves than was the case of pre-Vatican II rulebooks. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience still exist but the way they are written about is very different. Chastity is constructed as choice, poverty in the context of the times and obedience is to ‘the spirit’ rather than the superior. As Kate put it, ‘you still have obedience but you carry it in a different way’. Certainly, the position of the superior has changed. Religious are no longer required to kneel before her or ask permission for every act. Some congregations (including some of the ones in this study) have replaced the title superior with a more democratic-sounding address, such as ‘team leader’. The language used in the books has also changed: it is less authoritative and there is more emphasis on ‘dialogue’, ‘freedom’ and ‘responsibility’.¹⁷ Not all congregations have modernised in the same way, however, as was noted of the St. Cecile congregation in chapter five.¹⁸

Parts of scripture previously denied to women religious have been opened up to them and they have more choice regarding what prayers they say, as well as when they say them. Some women have also experimented with the way they pray, incorporating their own feelings much more:

We said we'll have shared prayer, we'll use the scripture and ...get a passage of scripture and read it and reflect on it. Maybe [each of us] say a few words about it, what has struck you and then read it again and then reflect for a little bit longer and share. And of course the depth of the sharing automatically, you know, changed our community. [Frances]

For several reasons, these included, it is no longer possible to predict the 'average day' for a religious regarding their prayer or spiritual duties.

Although still members of communities, there is more space for individualism in religious life, something Irene regarded as 'a positive thing':

I think we've become a lot more caring, you know, for one another. We, ourselves, are given ...much more consideration ...we're much more valued I would say as human beings ...An individual now really matters. Long ago, you were one of a number.

Women are able to express their own opinions and are often encouraged to do so. For example, the modern guide book of the St. Louise congregation affirms that 'because we respect each sister and the gifts she brings to the community, we encourage one another to express opinions, insights, and aspirations' (CSSL, 1984:78). Previously regarded as a vanity and against the principle of humility, individual work or training preferences are now taken into account and women are able to suggest their own personal ministries (although these have to be approved by the community). Also in contrast to the pre-

Vatican II regime, there is a recognition that religious need space and privacy within their own lives.

These changes are significant because they strike at the heart of pre-Vatican II religious organisation and identity. Less scripted notions of religious life and identity give women religious the opportunity to renegotiate their sense of themselves as religious. Some of the women in this study welcomed the opportunity to rethink, question, discuss and ultimately transform their own religious identity:

We suddenly discovered freedom ...that we were responsible and that we shouldn't just be saying 'yes' all the time but that we should be questioning ...Oh! ...it was like ...a new dawn for me ... The benefits were incalculable. [Frances]

Some women began to take a more active role in defining the meaning of religious life and their vocation for themselves, as the following quote from Catherine shows:

I'm guided more by instinct ...what my conscience tells me rather than ...rules and regulations and 'do's' and 'don'ts'. One time I could quote all the rules and regulations off by heart ...I wouldn't even know where they are now!

Catherine talked a great deal about the need to be 'free' to follow God and described her previous convictions as 'crazy' and 'tortuous' in retrospect, illustrating that she was not only creating a new religious identity for herself but redefining her former beliefs and practices. Her life was no longer dictated, she said, by a 'false' set of rules but a more developed sense of her 'spirituality' (akin to that of her mother's). Catherine described her religious identity as 'my own personal relationship with God, whoever he or she may be'. Others also spoke of a more 'adult' relationship with God among them Frances, Josephine, Margaret and Lilian.

Religious Identity Reconfigured – Once More.

Renegotiation of religious identity often involved not only redefinition but re-location – outside the formal institutionalisation of religious life and within the women themselves: literally, it became part of them, rather than they a part of it. The women reconfigured their religious identity so that it no longer subsumed all other identities within it and in doing so freed up the space in which to pursue individual identity projects of their own (which, as we have seen in chapter five, included gender, sexual and feminist identities).

There were various ways in which the women created a distance between themselves and the institutionalisation that had been the backbone of the pre-Vatican II regime. One of the most significant ways was in choosing to live or work outside their congregations. Congregations and the institutions they ran were often housed in large imposing buildings that physically and metaphorically created a barrier between religious and seculars. As Vera put it:

We [had] to get down to true religion ... And I welcome it. I think it's very good. I think it's very good for religious orders to shed the habit, shed the buildings and do what we're there to do. What we came into religious life to do.

Movement out of convents was a means by which religious could establish a closer relationship with the laity and be less distinct as a result. At the time of the interviews, few of the women lived in convents in the traditional sense of the word,¹⁹ while the majority of them had been in the past or were presently engaged in work outside their congregation.²⁰

Work was an important method of pursuing individual identity projects and many of the women either retrained in untraditional areas of work or moved into areas of employment not previously available (including in women's groups, with the homeless in outreach projects and as a probation officer). Although the women were establishing some distance between themselves and the former institutionalisation of religious life, this should not be seen as a distance from religious life *per se*, or from their religious commitment. Josephine's work campaigning for Irish prisoners in British gaols and as a counsellor within the Irish community meant that she rarely spent time with her own religious community ('[I'd] stagger in at three o'clock in the morning and there was a note on the pillow saying "do you still live here?")', but she described her work as a reflection of her commitment to religious life. For her, it was not a 'lessening' of religious commitment or vocation but a reconfiguration of the terms of that identity.

In reformulating her religious identity Margaret positioned herself *and* her congregation outside of the Catholic Church:

We as a group of women [have] crept out from their influence and we run our own affairs. And that's the good thing of being a congregation of women ...even though we're in a male dominated Church, I think we're very much in charge of our own lives and our own affairs ...People ...associate us with the Church, they identify us with the Church [but] we're not.

Others too were keen to establish a distance between themselves and a Church that they regarded as reluctant to modernise, one which wanted to hold on to its patriarchal power structure. Talking about the difficulty in getting the Catholic Church as a body to embrace inclusive language, Frances remarked:

You find priests go on 'men, men, men, men, men'. You find a few who don't and it's very arresting because it's so rare ... There are very few ones that really have gone into it properly and let it affect themselves, you know ... it's about power.

The decision not to wear the habit was another means by which women sought to re-configure their religious identity.²¹ As Vera's quote above suggested, the habit was part of the 'trappings' of religious life. In opting not to wear one, the women were choosing not to be immediately identifiable as religious. Frances appreciated what it meant to be 'anonymous' and not 'stick out' as a nun. Similarly Margaret felt that in wearing secular dress 'we're saying ... we're not apart from other people, we're the same as you'. Choosing to be seen as something other than a nun (initially or primarily), was an identity project in itself, contrary to the principles of the pre-Vatican II regime and gave the women a degree of control over how they presented themselves to others. A number of the women had also dispensed with using the title 'Sister' and asked that I call them by their baptismal name.²²

In chapter five, I examined the way some of the women claimed an identity as women alongside that of religious, even privileging their identity as women. Indeed, some women made an effort to conceal their religious identity all together.²³ For example, Catherine said 'I do not identify myself as a sister', Sarah that she would 'shy away' from revealing that she was a religious, while Teresa was concerned to 'keep the religious bit hidden'. These women were not rejecting their own religious identity but trying to control how others regarded them based on stereotypical notions of religious as repressed (Lilian), old-fashioned (Teresa), subordinated by the Church (Margaret) or 'not proper women' (Josephine). Controlling what might have been displayed outwardly also gave the women

the opportunity to subvert stereotypes by letting people know they were a religious on their own terms, often when they least expected it.

Not all the women in this study reacted to Vatican II in the same way. While the majority responded positively, there were others who were more ambiguous and a small number who had not come to terms with the changes at all.²⁴ Even the broad range of responses I encountered, however, could not include those who were prompted to leave religious life in the wake of Vatican II, as a great number of women did. The ‘haemorrhage’ from religious life consisted of those who realised under the greater freedoms that religious life was not for them, as well as those who ‘were lost ... couldn’t cope [when] the structures were removed’ (Kate). Others leaving made the process of change difficult for those that stayed: ‘that was a hard period because that was when a lot of our friends left and you’d wonder ... you know, should I do the same? ... It was very, very tough’ (Irene).

Of the women in this study, Annette, Elaine, Hannah, Kate and May expressed some reservations about the changes that had been introduced, feeling that something vital or important had been lost. As Kate put it ‘I thought it was a bit stupid. Some of [the changes] were not for the best, I felt ... I think sometimes you can throw out the baby with the bath water’. Although Bernadette was aware of Vatican II, it appeared not to have touched the way she lived her life to any great extent. She seemed reluctant to talk about how she felt and continually used language that emphasised a collective, communal identity (see chapter three). Of those who were more ambiguous, Elaine seemed least happy about the changes. Her hesitancy when she remarked ‘I wonder is [change] a good thing, you know, you just, but I think it is, “all things worse to good”, if you’ve heard it, if

you love God' gave me the impression she was trying to convince herself, more than she was me, that the changes were a positive thing.

In fact, Elaine employed interesting tactics to deal with Vatican II which included telling herself that she *must* adapt to the changes under her vow of obedience. For example, according to the rule of her congregation, Elaine had been forbidden to visit home when she entered religious life in 1945. This rule was changed in the 1960s but Elaine was reluctant to 'break the promise I had made'. Eventually – in the late 1970s – she felt compelled to relent on the basis that:

You felt the odd one out and you were sort of saying, now you *must* go home. This is the regulation and you feel this was obedience too, you know, and you *have* to.

What is so fascinating about Elaine's approach is that in order to re-claim a position as 'submissive' she had to re-configure her own identity under the terms of the pre-Vatican II regime, in a way that might be construed by others as an act of agency.

Other women chose to cling on to elements of the pre-Vatican II religious identity in less totalising ways. For example, taking advantage of the opportunity to return home or change work, but continuing to wear the habit and/or maintain an identity as a religious that subsumed all others. Annette, Bernadette, Elaine, Hannah and Kate each chose to wear the habit (or some form of it) as a visible reflection of their religious status. These same women, along with May, identified themselves first and foremost as religious. Annette identified 'sister' as her 'proudest, proudest title' while Kate seemed unable to countenance the idea of alternative identity at all. When asked if she felt people in

England positioned her any differently because she was Irish, Kate remarked ‘but I was a *sister*’ suggesting she felt her status and identity as religious negated all others.

Tension, Contestation and the ‘Essence’ of Religious Life

Certain tensions surrounded the issue of change and modernisation within religious life, however, including the extent to which some women were willing to embrace change. Annette and Elaine made humorous but dismissive remarks about ‘modern’ nuns to the effect that they had ‘no faith’ (Annette) or took ‘no vows’ (Elaine), suggesting an ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide. Discord was also implicit in a reference Hannah made to wearing the habit – or, more specifically, others choosing *not* to wear it:

I think it’s important [to wear the habit]. I mean, I laugh at some ...at Brownies²⁵ ...in their hat and uniform. I said, ‘why do you wear that ...if you’re not prepared to wear a veil?’. ‘Well, [they say], you have to be recognised’. I said, ‘that’s why I’m wearing *this*!’

Hannah’s comment about the external appearance of religious points to a wider tension in religious life over the extent to which women religious wished, remained or could claim to be intrinsically ‘different’ or ‘distinct’ in the post-Vatican II period. This was also a question fundamentally about gender and the ‘kind’ of women religious were. While some women clearly embraced the opportunity to be and be seen as ‘normal’ women, others, like Hannah, wanted to maintain a sense of difference from women who did not have a vocation, had not entered religious life and had not taken holy orders. For some women, difference was retrospectively regarded as negative, a symbol of the Church’s attitude towards women religious as less capable than male religious, while at the same time one that suggested religious were not proper women (‘the habit made you stand out

like a sore thumb ...I'd love to have said, 'look, in spite of the way I look ...I'm not a freak!' (Margaret)). For others, however, difference was the very essence of religious life.

Another example of the tension surrounding change came from May who mentioned that she was 'irritated' by women 'going to town' with inclusive language. Although she did not say so, I guessed that this was in response to a recent Chapter decision by her congregation to convert to inclusive language in documents and prayer, something others expressed support for, among them Frances. Conflict could also exist within individuals. For example, though fully supportive of the changes, Vera remarked at one point, with a degree of irritation:

Even though I say I kicked against the regime for a quite a long time, it's amazing the impact it's had on me and how in certain respects, even though I seem to be free of it, I am *not* free. I'm *not* free of the yoke of religious life that was imposed.

So difficult had some of the women found Vatican II that it led to poor mental health. Of the women in this study, five mentioned suffering some sort of breakdown to me, often associated with Vatican II and the greater freedoms to explore and question the meaning of religious life and their role within it. The tensions that often arose in response to Vatican II were not just that some women took the decision to speak or look differently but that, in disturbing the *community and commonality* of religious life, some felt its very essence was being challenged and laid open to question. This was a serious and far-reaching threat for those women who relied on structure and rules to define religious life and themselves as religious.

Religious life in the pre-Vatican II period was based on communal conformity to a known and printed set of rules. The changes described in this chapter and the last surely begs the question: what now made religious different? What was now the essence of religious life? Indeed, in elevating the status of the laity – all are now ‘called to God’ – and repealing the ‘superiority’ of celibacy, Vatican II might have served (inadvertently) to undermine for some, if not leave undefined, the essential character of religious life. For those who embraced the changes, a reconfigured relationship with God/Christ or their chosen work became the more personally defined, nebulous and private quintessence of religious life. For those who had relied and adapted to the rules and structure, however, redefinition, especially on their own terms, was anathema to them – as was any sort of individual or personal redefinition by those around them. The more malleable and less formal organisation of religious life was positively embraced by those who saw in it the opportunity to redefine their own religious identity but was less positively experienced by those who did not want it altered.

Although to some degree threatened, individual identity projects did not, however, negate communal identity. All the women I interviewed continued to regard their congregational identity as important, even though some had re-negotiated how this would be practised or expressed. Individually, the women tended to emphasise various distinctive – and positive – characteristics about their own congregation (for example, that it was more democratic than others, quicker to modernise, more in touch with tradition, had a very good reputation, was less strict and so on). For all the women, community was a vital source of belonging and support, which could be practical and/or psychological: Elaine felt ‘naked’ when outside her congregation and was always in a hurry to return. Vera lived alone so

her sense of belonging was more abstract than Elaine's but she kept a database of all the members of her international congregation and felt she could call on any one of them for support or assistance. Although the structures had allowed for some to pursue individual identity projects beyond religious life, many still felt 'one' within it. Some women expressed a communal religious identity that was not congregation-specific, usually in response to negative attitudes levied against religious generally or to emphasise the importance of religious in the history of education, health and social work.

CONCLUSION

As they were growing up, the women of this study experienced their Catholicism as something innate. This belied, however, the processes of socialisation they underwent, and the gendered roles their parents had assumed in passing religion on to them. While Catholicism had informed and was in some ways inextricable from their self-identity as daughters and Irish, the strict and scripted religious identity they were expected to take on under the pre-Vatican II regime aimed to subsume all others into it. The women have had to reconstitute their religious identity once more in the wake of Vatican II, a process some have embraced more than others and one that is kept in check by other religious as well as congregational membership.

In exploring the women's religious identity throughout their lives, this chapter has focused particularly on themes of agency, resistance and negotiation: the modes by which the women claim subjectivities for themselves and the space given to them or created by them in which to negotiate a sense of self. In the different periods of their lives and given the

different structures which have imposed upon them to varying degrees, the women's own role or consciousness in defining their sense of self as Catholic has been shown to be in flux. As the final section showed most clearly, perhaps, religious identity has been revealed as a site of negotiation and contestation – within individual women, between them, with religious life, over time and in relation to fixed or changing social structures. As mentioned in this chapter, but as yet unexplored, the fact and experience of migration from Ireland to England impacted significantly on the women in this study, and it is to this that the next chapter turns.

¹ The bell rung in Catholic Churches at noon (and broadcast on the Irish national radio station) inviting the faithful to recite a devotional exercise in honour of the Incarnation.

² And one that appeared in a published account of the life of Fr. Damien which suggested a natural link between nationalism/national identity, Catholicism and the role of mothering: 'someone has written that the grandest school in Ireland is at an Irish mother's knee. It is true of every land. Mothers, wherever they are, are the custodians of a nation's greatness' (Henagan, 1954:9).

³ In fact, when initially asked whom of their parents was responsible for passing down Catholicism to them, few of the women identified either their mother or father. It was only when they were asked more specifically about who led them in prayer or prepared them for Mass and so on that they (or I) was able to see the distinct role parents had undertaken.

⁴ Interestingly, the only woman to describe her mother as 'spiritual' was Catherine.

⁵ Archbishop of Dublin, 1940-1972.

⁶ 1939-1958.

⁷ That is not to say the women were not also influenced by *women* religious. The impact of religious in society and the missionary sister has already been examined in chapter 5. In addition, women were influenced by individual religious they knew or met. Both May and Geraldine considered entering religious life after it was suggested to them by nuns.

⁸ When talking later about the changes in Catholicism brought about by Vatican II, May remarked that one of the things she missed was 'the sense of mystery'.

⁹ Holy Hour is formally defined as 'a paraliturgical eucharistic devotion involving adoration of the exposed Blessed Sacrament for one-hour periods' (McBrien, 1995:619). At a specified time on Saturday evenings, though not officially obliged to do so, many Catholics attended Church to sit in prayerful contemplation before the Blessed Sacrament for one hour periods.

¹⁰ Four women – Frances, Rebecca, Elaine and Kate – left Ireland before entering religious life. In Catholic boarding schools, Frances and Rebecca noticed little change in the way that religion was practised. Elaine worried about 'losing' her Catholicism in England and went to great lengths to ensure this would not happen (organising a special daily Mass for herself and her cousin in a local church, for example). Kate enjoyed the challenge that being a Catholic in England presented which made her separate her 'real' faith from her 'cradle Catholicism'.

¹¹ This estimation is based on the women's accounts and with reference to their pre-Vatican II rulebooks.

¹² The women who mentioned breaking the rules did so with the advantage of hindsight, knowing that Vatican II had since redefined the rules they broke as archaic and irrelevant. They might not have spoken so lightly of something that was judged to important if it was still held to be so.

¹³ This was hardly surprising given the importance of work in the women's initial attraction to religious explored in chapter 5. Significantly, the two women who described themselves as unfulfilled in the pre-

Vatican II period were unhappy in their work situations. Vera found herself 'totally unsuited' to teaching while Catherine, although she was promised otherwise before entering, was never given the opportunity to work with children, her 'life's ambition'.

¹⁴ This would have been expected of all religious in the pre-Vatican II period. However, when the opportunity arose after Vatican II, many of the women did reconnect with their families. The women who continued to talk about religious life as 'replacing' the family at the time of the interviews were Bernadette, Elaine, Hannah, Irene and Kate.

¹⁵ During this visit she was chaperoned constantly by an elderly nun and had to stay in a local convent.

¹⁶ Although there are a selection of books on Vatican II itself (see, for example, Bull, 1966; Kaiser, 1963; Stacpoole, 1986) and a number on its consequences on lay Catholicism (e.g. Hastings, 1991), few books focus on the impact of Vatican II within religious life (an exception is Örsy, 1968) and none specifically on women religious. This is remarkable given the significance of the event and its aftermath and is, perhaps, due to the fact that so many left religious life following Vatican II. Beale (1987), in a chapter devoted to women religious, does explore the impact of Vatican II but only its positive effects. O'Donoghue's (1991) article is more insightful.

¹⁷ These were words that appeared repeatedly in the St. Louise congregation's constitutions (dated 1985) and a more recent version of the St. Mildred constitution (1993).

¹⁸ However, one of the two women I interviewed from the St. Cecile congregation was already subverting the rules laid out in the constitution by working outside the community (the only one in her congregation to do so). Unbeknown to her congregation, Catherine also chose, against convent protocol, not to wear her habit while on holiday in Ireland.

¹⁹ Of the women in this study only Irene, Frances, Elaine, Bernadette, Geraldine and Catherine lived in communities of over five women. The rest lived in small communities, with the exception of Vera and Annette who lived alone.

²⁰ The exceptions were Bernadette, Frances, Elaine, Hannah, Irene, May and Rebecca

²¹ As well, as we have seen in chapter 5, as a means of reconfiguring gendered identity.

²² I called Vera, Josephine, Lilian, Margaret, Sarah, Teresa and Joan by their baptismal names. However, that is not to say that the rest of the women used the title 'Sister' generally. They may have chosen not to correct my use of it as we were expecting to meet each other only a few times.

²³ Including Catherine, Vera, Geraldine, Margaret, Sarah and Teresa.

²⁴ Although it is untrue to say there were only three responses from the women, and while the following groupings were more porous than I suggest here, it might be said that the women who were most fully supportive of the changes were Catherine, Vera, Frances, Geraldine, Josephine, Lilian, Margaret, Norah, Eileen, Pauline, Rebecca Sarah, Teresa and Joan, although even within this group there were certain distinctions between 'how far' the changes should go (i.e. Catherine and some others did not agree with sisters living alone); Irene, Annette, Hannah, Kate and May were more ambiguous about the changes; Elaine was least positive about the changes while Bernadette seemed least affected by them (and therefore, difficult to categorise).

²⁵ The junior Girl Guides.

Chapter 7: ETHNICITY/IRISHNESS

INTRODUCTION

The creation of an independent state and the consolidation of an Irish national identity formed the backdrop to the period in which the women of this study were born and grew up. Their ethnic identity – their sense of ‘being’ Irish – was informed by particular constructions of Irishness that occurred in the wake of independence, which defined Irishness principally in opposition to its former colonial power, Britain, and with respect to the religion of the majority of the Irish population, Catholicism. Following a brief outline of ethnicity in this period of their lives, the second and third sections of this chapter move on to explore what happened to the women’s sense of Irishness within religious life which, for most, has been lived predominantly outside Ireland. These sections focus upon the extent to which ethnicity remained important and continued to shape the experiences of religious life: inside and outside the convent, in the pre- and post-Vatican II period, mostly in England but also in Ireland. In the final section, the impact of migration upon the women’s sense of themselves as Irish is explored in the first instance, by examining the particular ways in which those who now live in England conceptualise and express an Irish identity there – which suggests, in fact, a specifically ‘Irish in England’ identity – and, thereafter, by focusing upon the women’s experiences of Irishness elsewhere.

Regarded as preferable to the term ‘race’, still no clear definition of ethnicity, or what constitutes membership of an ethnic group exists, though it remains a major focus of identity for individuals. According to Smith (1986), ethnic groups tend to share

characteristics or attributes which may include some or all of the following: name, myth of ancestry, shared historical memories, common culture, (symbolic) homeland and a sense of solidarity (1986:21-46). While I find Smith's analysis useful, my own approach is much informed by Hall's concept of ethnicity as performative, fluid and open to – indeed, in need of – interrogation (1996, 1992; Enloe, 1980; Brah, 1996). There is some debate surrounding whether or not the Irish in Britain constitute an ethnic minority at all (Hickman & Walter, 1997), which is ironic given the official racialisation of the Irish in and by Britain up to the 1950s and the ambiguous position they have held since then (Delaney, 2000:209; Paul, 1997:108; see also chapter four). It is my opinion that Irish people in Britain constitute an ethnic group according to Smith's characterisation. Equally, however, I see their ethnicity (indeed, all ethnicities) as partly constructed, based on attributed value judgements of inferiority/superiority. In addition, I regard Irish people as 'ethnicised' in Britain, by which I mean they have a group identity projected upon them, one that is tied to historical and colonial constructions of Irish people as 'inferior', but also as 'white' (Walter, 2001).

Irishness and Englishness can be interpreted in various ways and this chapter will explore the complex dynamics that exist within these modalities of power. Ethnicity is necessarily about boundaries (Barth, 1969; Brah, 1996) – who belongs and who is outside, who is othered and who is othering – and this will be a central theme of the chapter. What it means to be Irish, to be English, to be Irish in England or to be Irish elsewhere shifts and changes according to different axes of power or interpretation. Here, I try to show the varied subjective ethnic identity positions available to and projected upon a relatively small group of women to illustrate the overall complexity of 'identity'.

GROWING UP

As was explored in chapter six, Catholicism for the women of this study was more than a personal system of belief and worked in a similar way to national identity. Irishness also existed in opposition to Britishness, or more specifically, Englishness.¹ Indeed, in the society in which they grew up, the women were often exposed to *anti-English* sentiment that befitted the newly post-colonial state. From an early age, they were taught in school to think of England/Britain as Ireland's 'other': not only Protestant in contrast to Ireland's Catholicism, but more urban, less pious and more dangerous. Some women received a similar message at home. For example, Josephine's mother told her she would rather see her 'dead at my feet than in that place'. The women were aware of Anglophobic sentiment and often identified their own (or their family's) position with respect to this. Several of them absorbed anti-English sympathies themselves, for example, Hannah:

I was very interested in History and, of course, we were taught it with a bias against England. I remember saying to an uncle, "I'd prefer to have the Germans here rather than the English". And he said, "you don't realise what you're saying". But I thought I knew what I was saying.

Other women received a 'different education', as Pauline put it, at home where she 'could not say a *thing* against England'. Similarly, Frances described her mother as an 'anglophile' while Eileen 'never had any problem about England' because her ('pro-British') father had been in the British civil service and 'hadn't much time for the kind of graft that went on when the Free State was declared'. These women would later enter an English congregation.

Despite their up-bringing, the women of this study entered religious congregations that required them to spend some (and perhaps all) of their religious life in England.² Any negative attitudes they might have had towards England were outweighed by their personal ambitions for religious life. In any case, as religious, they did not construct themselves nor were they constructed by others as Irish ‘emigrants’ to England.

THE PRE-VATICAN II PERIOD

Within Religious Life

The majority of the women in this study left Ireland to enter religious life in England or left Ireland having already recently entered religious life.³ As we have seen, the pre-Vatican II regime demanded that religious, as part of the process of becoming a nun, shed as much of their secular selves as was possible. This included any national, regional or familial identity. The women were ‘not encouraged’, as Irene put it,⁴ to talk about where they were from and this was made clear in the rule books. For example, the St. Louise rule book stated that ‘the sisters ...will strip themselves of their self-will, as well as of all natural attachment to their country, parents [and] friends’ (CSSL:113). Indeed, the ability to move away from such affiliations was considered a sign of progress toward ‘becoming’ a nun.

Contrary to the ideals of the pre-Vatican II regime, however, ethnicity did remain significant within the congregation. Although ‘the rule’ was designed to ‘eliminate’ (through repression) personal identities or histories, religious life in general and congregations in particular continued to position the women within them in specific ways with respect to class, gender *and* race/ethnicity. Under the pre-Vatican II regime and from the moment of

entry, novices were schooled to replace their self identity with a communal congregational identity. However, this corporate ‘personality’ often had an ethnic basis. For the women of this study, the experience of ethnicity within religious life in the pre-Vatican II period was greatly influenced by their choice of congregation – most especially whether that congregation was a majority-Irish congregation, as four in this study were, or a middle-class English congregation, as one was.

The Majority-Irish Congregations (*The Sisters of St. Louise; the Sisters of St. Nadine; the Sisters of St. Cecile; and the Sisters of St. Marie*)

That ethnicity remained a relevant factor in religious life is illustrated by the use of ‘Irish’ as an adjective to describe the majority-Irish congregations that the women of this study entered into, not only the population, but the institutions themselves. For example, Catherine said of her congregation ‘it was a very Irish community’, while Margaret remarked that, ‘in fact, there was a very Irish feel to the [community] in this country ...*All the vocations came from Ireland ... Irish culture was just transposed*’.⁵

Culture is, of course, a nebulous term defined positively and negatively, over time, from within, and externally. As such, it would be difficult to define ‘Irish culture’ in any specific or non-contradictory way. What Margaret refers to is certain ‘badges’ of Irishness that were maintained within religious life but which befitted the refined, regulated and strict nature of the convent in this period – as well as its class identity. Thus, a particularly middle-class Catholic Irish identity existed, one selected and sanctioned by the congregations themselves. So, for example, Irish feast days were given greater recognition, pictures representing

Ireland hung on convent walls, conversations during recreation focused on Ireland and the limited news that the women did receive often related to what was happening 'back home'.⁶ Positions of authority within the congregation were also for the most part held by Irish women, a reflection of demographics certainly but also, perhaps, of nepotism.

That the congregations had 'Irish' personalities, and populations, made the transition – from Ireland to England, as well as from secular to nun – easier for the women of this study and gave rise to feelings of belonging in what were alien environments, both of the congregation and English society. This was something most of the women commented on. For example, Kate said 'I felt more at home ...our spirit is a very family spirit anyway'.

Feeling 'at home' conveys a sense of belonging. For Kate, the intimacy of her own family was being recreated in religious life. That the congregations were 'Irish' gave the women a sense that they were still 'at home', despite (for the most part) having left Ireland for the first time. In fact, for Margaret at least, the preponderance of Irish women and the expression of an Irish culture allowed her to imagine that she had never left Ireland at all. She said, 'it didn't seem like England ...just seemed [like] a little bit of Ireland stuck in Manchester'.

However, the predominance of Irish 'culture' (however it was defined by the congregations),⁷ was maintained at the expense of other ethnicities and cultures, especially Englishness. By the nineteenth century, Catholicism had been established as a vital component of Irish national identity, in opposition to English Protestantism. Intrinsic in the discourse of innate Irish Catholicism was a degree of Irish superiority and anti-

English/Protestant bias. This was reflected in the congregations themselves. For example, the Irish way of doing things was considered to be the ‘right’ way: Catherine was told as a young novice to ‘follow what the Irish sisters are doing’ while another woman overheard a sister being told she was ‘doing fine for an English nun’. Clearly, some Irish women took attitudes of Irish Catholic superiority – and English inferiority – with them to England:

There was a judgmental attitude towards [English] people ...their faith wasn’t as strong as ours ...England was not as Catholic and as faithful as Ireland. [We were] closer to God! [Margaret]

The binary in which to be Irish was constructed as superior based on an intrinsically Catholic religiosity, affected English sisters within the congregations.⁸ Lilian observed that ‘sometimes sisters would become more Irish than the Irish themselves ...to do that when there’s a couple of other English sisters in the community can be quite insensitive’. Some of Kate’s Irish co-religious would emphasise the superiority of Irishness by verbally making reference to positive character traits of ‘the Irish’ at the expense, she felt, of English sisters:

Some sisters, they’re very ‘the Irish’ this and ‘the Irish’ that and ‘the Irish’ this that and the other. It’s too much when you’re ...living in a different culture and that can put people’s backs up. See, the English were very much in the minority in our congregation and I think sometimes they got a bit too much of the Irish. They did. *Some* of them said [so]. Some of them wouldn’t let you know. [Kate]

Distinguishing the self from the ‘other’ is based not only on difference but assumed or created superiority (Said, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). English sisters in these congregations were being ‘othered’. What is interesting, however, is the context in which this was happening, that is, a society in which the broader picture of othering worked against Irish people in England (see chapter four). In fact, the two were related. While an element of innate Irish Catholicism (and religious superiority) was evident in the Irish missionary project, in England this existed in response to a society which positioned Irish

and especially Irish Catholicism as an unruly and suspect minority. The construction of Irish Catholic superiority cannot be separated from constructions of Irishness by or in Britain. In asserting an identity from a marginal position, the Irish women were entering into an othering project themselves – against English sisters – based on established discourses of Irishness formed in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In order to understand how this takes place, it is necessary to reconsider religious congregations and their position within the wider society in which they are placed. For this, I rely on Avtar Brah's notion of 'diapora space' which, among other things, problematises the notion of places/nations being made up of majorities and minorities (or dominant and dominated groups) and considers instead, the use of 'diaspora' as an analytical tool (Brah, 1996). For Brah, 'diaspora space' is a 'conceptual category inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed or represented as indigenous' (1996:209). This more fluid approach to subjectivity, and it is one Walter uses to explore the experiences of Irish women in Britain (2001), allows us to move away from colour-based notions of who is 'inside' and 'outside' and think instead of people inhabiting dominant/dominated spaces simultaneously or in sequence, depending on the 'dimension of differentiation' (Brah, 1996:189).

The women of this study occupied dominant and dominated subject positions simultaneously: in the context of English society, where they were othered (as Irish, as Catholic and as women), and within the religious communities in which they lived, where they formed a dominant group. Although Brah did not use diaspora space to explore these

particular dynamics,⁹ I find her more fluid approach to place allows me to make sense of how the women were members of a dominant group in one respect, and othered in another. At the same time, the English sisters – the ‘native’ / ‘indigenous’ – are being othered in their ‘own’ country, highlighting Catherine Hall’s assertion that ‘Englishness is just another ethnicity’ (cited by Brah, 1996:210).

Organisationally, congregations were religious communities (and also communities of women) but they were internally divided along ethnic lines,¹⁰ creating a situation in which, in the same religious community, some members were more ‘in’ than others.¹¹ Religious congregations maintained clear and distinct boundaries between themselves and the ‘outside’ which allowed for these different dynamics to operate within them. Despite the high ideals of the pre-Vatican II regime, it is obvious that ethnicity remained important within these congregations. Religious communities were still social institutions – modalities of social relations – and as such, were riddled with hierarchies and exclusionary practices. They were also sites of power in the Foucauldian sense. Power is not generally associated with ‘minority’/‘excluded’ groups but religious congregations are ‘discursive formations’ (Brah, 1996:125) in which constructions on the basis of ethnicity gave power to some of the women over others. Drawing on theories of othering (Said, 1978), this research also brings out the complexities of othering projects and the possibility of simultaneously othering *and* being othered.

Moreover, othering could occur on the basis of ethnicity within the same ethnic group. In contrast to the experiences recounted above, Annette felt othered in a majority-Irish congregation in England precisely on account of her Irishness – or form of Irishness. Due

to travel restrictions imposed between England and Ireland during World War II, the St. Louise congregation created a provisional noviciate in Ireland for Elaine and two other postulants. Elaine remained in Ireland following her profession and, as a result, had not been to England before being moved there in 1957, eighteen years after she entered religious life. In England, she felt dislocated – classed and ‘raced’ differently to those around her:

I found it very tough. [The congregation] was very British. And very upper class. [I] began to feel this inferiority complex ...they kind of looked down on me. I was from the bogs and knew nothing.

Annette felt she was positioned as rural, working-class (despite her middle-class background) and inferior in England, which conforms to stereotypical assumptions made about Irish people generally. She often used the terms ‘British’ and ‘Irish’ to distinguish between ‘them’ and ‘us/me’ which relied on historical constructions of Irish as *not* British and vice versa. Here, however, she is referring primarily to other Irish women whom, for Annette, had ‘become British’, thus suggesting a fluidity around ethnicity. Kate described the St. Louise congregation as ‘Irish’ but, clearly, whatever way it was Irish conflicted with Annette’s notion of Irish, which included using the Irish language:

Irish culture is so different ...I did everything through Irish all my life: I was trained through Irish, everything was through Gaelic and ...Gaelic culture was [not] appreciated.

Language is an important ‘badge’ of cultural identity but the women of this study entered non-Irish congregations which, outside Ireland, certainly would not have worked through the medium of Irish. In addition, English might have seemed more appropriate to their class position.¹² For Elaine, however, it created a division between herself and her Irish co-religious. By providing an alternative reading than Kate of the ‘ethnic identity’ of the

St. Louise congregation, her account also illustrates how differently corporate ethnic ‘personalities’ could be read, interpreted and experienced by individuals. This is not to suggest, however, that moving to England following a considerable period in religious life would automatically produce this response. Bernadette, who had been a religious in Ireland for twelve years before moving to England, found the transition to be almost seamless, remarking ‘once we were with the sisters, we were at home’.

The English Congregation (*The Sisters of St. Mildred*)

All nine women who did not enter majority-Irish congregations entered the same English congregation. The St. Mildred congregation maintained from its inception in the nineteenth century a middle-class English ethos. Prospective candidates were expected to be able to reflect this ethos themselves. For Irish women, this meant ‘becoming’ English, and middle class (if they were not already). To this end, Irish choir sisters were offered elocution lessons to get rid of their ‘brogue’.¹³ According to its dictionary definition (Chambers, 1998), ‘brogue’ refers not only to an Irish accent but a speech impediment. Interpreting Irish accents or speech patterns as defective epitomises one of the most commanding stereotypes of the Irish in England – as people of low intelligence. Kells describes speech as central to our sense of identity (1995c, quoted in Walter, 2001:165) and this is especially so for Irish people in England, where accent is such a key form of identification. In being asked to change how they spoke, the women were being asked to question their very sense of self. De-nationalisation was supposedly a feature of the pre-Vatican II regime, but it was only Irish women who were being asked to de-nationalise.

Only two of the nine women I spoke to from the St. Mildred congregation mentioned the elocution lessons to me. This struck me as interesting given the fundamental act of repressing Irishness such lessons represented. In the notes I made following the interviews, however, I noted that three of the women spoke with barely detectable Irish accents.¹⁴ The rest of the women spoke with slight regional Irish accents, with the exception of Elaine who maintained a strong Kerry accent (although as a lay sister, she would not have been required to take elocution lessons). The two women who did mention elocution lessons, responded very differently to them. Although Pauline interpreted them (correctly in my view) as part of a project of ‘Anglicisation’, she agreed to attend the classes. Hannah, on the other hand, refused to take part.¹⁵ While Pauline did not feel that she was ‘badly affected’ by the lessons, both women recognised that they could be psychologically damaging to those less self-assured. Hannah remarked:

I never felt any inferior[ity] complex [but] I think some people did ...They had elocution lessons so they’d speak correctly. Some of them had to [learn] to talk [again] ...they laugh about them [now] but I think they found it very difficult.

Many Irish people living in Britain chose to change their accents so that they might not be recognised as Irish at all (Walter, 2001:165. See also Hickman & Walter, 1997), although it is not possible to judge how much more difficult it might have been to be requested or required to do so.

Irish women were not the only women to be offered voice training. Women with strong regional English accents were also given the opportunity to ‘take the edge off’ their accents, although for them this would not necessarily have represented de-nationalisation. Regional accents were associated with the working classes and elocution helped conceal working-

class roots. The implied message for Irish sisters, however, was that they were *all* working class. Irish migrants in Britain had traditionally been homogenised as working class (and potentially contaminant) (MacLaughlin 1999; Walter 1999, 2001). In fact, class and ethnicity could not easily be separated. Regional accents could have betrayed not only class but ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the working class Catholics in Britain were Irish migrants themselves or descendants of them (Fielding, 1993). Indeed, the English Catholic Church was eager to accent its patriotic *English* character in order to counterbalance the Protestant claim that the Catholic Church was a ‘mysterious, threatening and unEnglish force’, and to this end made great efforts to obscure the numerical importance of its Irish members (Fielding 1993:40-41). The respect and prestige of the St. Mildred congregation was built upon its ties to a specifically English, middle-class church and it might not have wanted to emphasise its Irish element (generally about one-third of accepted vocations came from Ireland, although the majority of lay sisters were Irish). In fact, according to Pauline, there had been some debate within the community concerning the wisdom of opening a recruitment house in Ireland. She mentioned that ‘there was quite a bit of fear in the English province that the standards would go down with this influx of the Irish’.

In addition to the formal distinction between choir and lay nuns, the St. Mildred congregation was internally organised according to a complex hierarchy based on ethnicity and social background which was not lost on entrants. Frances was aware that ‘nationality [wise] the Irish were ...fairly low’ while Pauline recognised that ethnicity and social background combined to position her in a particular way viz. a viz. the other women she entered with:

I wasn't the only Irish but I must say, we were very few ...and the others [had] been to a St. Mildred school. Muggins had not! ...Everything I did was wrong: my accent was wrong, what I said was wrong. Even the understanding of religion ...Irish religion was very devotional and this was considered very ignorant and low-class.

This othering of the Irish sisters (on the basis of ethnicity, religion and class) is the inverse of what was occurring in the majority-Irish congregations, where 'Irish' Catholicism was categorised as superior. Post-noviciate, the women learned 'how to behave' (Pauline's phrase) in an acceptable way and being Irish became less of a problem, externally at least. Internally, however, the women continued to 'feel' Irish and continued to be aware of their otherness. For example, Pauline felt 'sick' when her superior questioned the standards of an Irish priest by remarking 'of course, with an Irish priest, you never know their background'. Similarly, Hannah would 'get so mad [but] couldn't say anything' when her ('very, very British') co-religious made statements which assumed a knowledge about Ireland and its history but which, to Hannah, displayed an ignorance and anti-Irish bias. Given the strict nature of the convent, there was no space for these women to articulate their feelings but in continuing to be conscious of and claiming a sense of themselves as Irish and by reacting to these sorts of situations (albeit silently) they were holding on to their ethnicity and resisting de-nationalisation projects.

Questions about Irishness within religious life in the pre-Vatican II period tended to yield more detailed and lengthier responses from women in the St. Mildred congregation than was the case for the other women. Unlike the women from the majority-Irish congregations, who were able only retrospectively to recognise the importance of ethnicity in the pre-Vatican II regime (Catherine, for example, remarked that she 'didn't know any different, to be honest ...for many, many years'), the women in the St. Mildred congregation had a

‘double-knowledge’ of what was occurring. They had recognised simultaneously the quite different treatment themselves and other sisters were subjected to based on ethnicity.

Despite the importance of ethnicity, focusing solely on it serves to highlight ethnic differences while temporarily erasing other forms of identity (Brah, 1996: 124), including the forms of gender-based, religious or congregational community or contestation explored in the previous two chapters. This is true for respondents from both the majority-Irish and the English congregations that I have spoken to. Focusing on ethnicity alone may also mask the gains of religious life for the Irish women in the St. Mildred congregation (as it would those of English and other sisters in the majority-Irish congregations). While the hierarchical structure of the congregation positioned Irish women in a particular way, the prestige of the organisation was part of the appeal to the women (and their families). Moreover, the women achieved for the most part what they had hoped to in religious life: Eileen was able to continue her education and become a teacher, Pauline worked on the missions, and so on. Personal ambitions were often met without rising through the ranks of the organisation. Frances remarked that she ‘was given the best education and ...was teaching ...Life was just great [so] I didn’t really think very much about the government of the [community]’.

In any case, some of the women in this study did hold what were considered to be very prestigious positions in the St. Mildred congregation in the pre-Vatican II period. Rebecca, May and Hannah all taught in St. Mildred’s independent schools in England and Ireland. In addition, May and Hannah were both made headmistresses, illustrating that however ‘the

Irish' were constructed by the St. Mildred congregation, individual Irish sisters could and did rise through the ranks (even if, like Hannah, they 'refused' to lose their Irishness).¹⁶

The stated aim of the pre-Vatican II regime was to 'strip' religious of ethnic and other affiliations. However, far from ethnic identity 'withering away', as the rule required, it was actively inhabited, continued to be vested with meaning and was used as a marker by other religious as well as by those in wider society, although in different ways in the two 'types' of congregations. Moreover, the particular form of ethnic identity that religious unconsciously inhabited or, more consciously, were expected to take on, was not formed in a vacuum but was underpinned by deeply political histories. In attempting to draw attention to the different types of othering revealed in the women's narratives, it has not been my intention to suggest that forms of othering are equivalent in scale or consequence, or that the experience of being an English sister in a majority-Irish congregation is equivalent to the experience of being an Irish migrant (religious or not) in English society. What I have tried to do, however, is explore the more complex dynamics of being othered and othering that existed and were experienced by a group of women previously overlooked in Irish diaspora studies.

Policies of de-nationalisation, the privileging of particular ethnicities and practices of othering and silencing reflect the continuing significance of ethnicity within religious life before Vatican II. In a previous chapter, I explored the importance of gender in the 'formation' of nuns. While organisationally and officially ethnicity was of 'no consequence', it continued to influence the experience of religious life for the women of this study. Regimes of gender and ethnicity did not operate in the same way. Religious life was

about forming *all* its members in a particular way as women, whereas ethnicity affected the women in a more varied way. However, it seems that processes of othering existed on the basis of both.

Outside the Congregation

Under the pre-Vatican II regime religious in each of the congregations had very little contact with the wider society and that which existed was regulated by strict rules of conduct and behaviour. With the exception of letters to and from family, contact with the wider society was often confined to work situations. None of the women I spoke to felt that the hospital ward or classroom was ‘Irish’ in the way they spoke of their congregations being ‘Irish’. This was despite, for example, the number of first or later generations of Irish children that attended their Catholic schools.¹⁷ As a result, the ‘security’ or assumed sense of belonging an ‘Irish’ convent provided could be challenged in the work place. Margaret, who had experience of teaching in Ireland for four years, began to doubt her abilities when she entered a classroom in England and felt ‘shy in front of English students, [wondering] “am I up to this”’?

Similarly, it took Lilian two years to realise that it was ‘alright to be me and it was alright to be Irish’. On her first day working in England she met her parish priest, an Englishman, who had enquired (in a condescending manner) if she had ‘come up from the bogs in Ireland’. His comment reiterates once more the construction of Irish people as rural and suggests that movement to England offered a form of upward mobility (taking Irish people literally up and out of the bogs). As members of majority-Irish congregations, these women

occupied dominant/dominated positions simultaneously, traversing invisible boundaries as they left the classroom and returned to their congregations. Interestingly, it was only women from majority-Irish congregations who mentioned being aware of their Irishness at the point of contact with 'the outside'. Presumably, the women from the St. Mildred congregation had already 'confronted' their Irishness in the noviciate.

VATICAN II, 'THE TROUBLES' AND INCREASED ANTI-IRISH HOSTILITY

Within Religious Life

Vatican II allowed for a gradual relaxation of the strict convent rules which governed the way religious lived. The wider society entered the congregation through the media of newspapers, television and radio and, for the first time, the woman began to talk more freely about what was occurring 'outside'. With respect to ethnicity, initially at least, this allowed for a further entrenchment of divisions within the congregations I have spoken to: there was more opportunity within the majority-Irish congregations to assert an Irish identity while the women in the St. Mildred congregation became more aware of being Irish in an English congregation. A significant contributing factor to this was the period in which the changes of Vatican II filtered down into religious life, which coincided with the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, a renewed IRA campaign in Britain and increased anti-Irish hostility there also.

The Majority-Irish Congregations

In the majority-Irish congregations, relaxation of the convent rule gave rise to a more vigorous expression of Irishness. It was *Irish* media and music that entered the congregation ('we got Irish newspapers, Irish magazines ...there was Irish dancing, Irish singing' (Margaret)) and it was Irish feast days that were celebrated even more vociferously ('St. Patrick's Day was just *mega*' (Joan)). Given that the majority of the women in these congregations were Irish, as they began to be allowed visit home more regularly, a stronger connection with the island of Ireland also began to be formed. Stories about what was happening there and the experiences of the women when they returned could dominate conversations in the convent.

As before, but to a greater extent, this was at the expense of others, especially English sisters. Lilian remarked, 'it was quite strong, Irish songs or an Irish programme ...and sometimes the English sisters, they wouldn't say anything but they might not come [to join us], you know?' The preponderance of Irishness forced the English sisters to retreat to their bedrooms. The congregation had been transformed in many ways by Vatican II and there was more space for communal gatherings and recreation, for talk and dance and so on. However, as this was happening, the communal space was becoming more exclusive of English sisters.¹⁸ This was especially so given the subject matter often dealt with in the media. An example of this was given by Josephine, highlighting how particular divisions could be exposed as a result of the changes, and how certain viewpoints could dominate:

I remember Bloody Sunday *very* well. [It was on] the news. I [sank] into the chair saying 'oh my God', with my hands in my head ...I was so devastated by this ...and when I lifted my head, the English sisters had left the room ...that was a terrible time, but we didn't really

discuss it ... The English, to my knowledge, unless they spoke amongst themselves, never discussed it.

The congregation becomes a space where ethnicity is experienced and played out – openly this time. The communal religious identity is ruptured by the circumstances of the time. The English sisters, clearly made aware of the ethnic divide, withdraw to their rooms. Ironically, they are silenced at a time when there is more freedom for speech within religious life.

At the same time, however, the convent was gaining significance as a place of refuge for the Irish sisters given increased anti-Irish hostilities outside the convent:

We were very secure in that I lived with Irish people, Okay, I lived with English people as well but the majority would have been Irish [so] on a home front, you were kind of secure [because] you went home to that at night. [Josephine]

So ‘protected’, in fact, was Josephine (and almost dismissive of the English population in her congregation) that she did not feel the need, as she judged other Irish people had, to lose her accent. This additional reference to speech is poignant given the silence of the English women’s voices in the same congregation.

Hostilities clearly affected the dynamics of convent life, though not always in the same way. In Josephine’s congregation it was the English sisters who were silenced. However, as violence escalated and spilled over into Britain, in some cases it was the Irish women who began to feel less at ease, as the following quote from Kate illustrates:

It was fairly uncomfortable when the news was on and they were talking about the IRA ... because they were Irish and you were coming over to another country with bombs and you were killing innocent people and destroying buildings.

In this case it is the minority who are questioning the legitimacy of the majority to hold onto the dominant position they had assumed. Kate's comment also illustrates something which will be returned to later: by using the terms 'them' and 'us' interchangeably to talk about the activities of members of the IRA and Irish people in Britain, she unwittingly makes reference to a common occurrence in Britain, namely to assume a connection between the violence of the IRA and all Irish people (Curtis, 1984; Hickman & Walter, 1997; Hillyard, 1993; Walter, 2001). Kate also highlights the tendency for Irish people living in Britain to assume (or be expected to assume) some responsibility for that violence (Hickman & Walter, 1995:204; Walter, 2001:169).

The English Congregation

In the English congregation, an awareness of being Irish came to the fore again directly in relation to the outbreak of violence in Britain which, as Elaine suggests, was made worse by the relaxation of the convent rule:

But now [in the wake of Vatican II, we] can talk to each other and ...I would feel that the English nuns ...get very upset about the [activities of the IRA and] because we're Irish, we're [made to feel] in some way responsible ...And you feel that they are very English. And we are very Irish.

Elaine's awareness of herself as Irish and others as English is in direct contrast to a comment she made about pre-Vatican II religious life, to the effect that the convent rule would not allow sisters to think of each other as belonging to any nationality because 'we were all the same'. In replacing the communal 'we' with 'them' and 'us', the protection and security of the congregation is destabilised. Although the communal 'we' was very

obviously cross-cut in the pre-Vatican II period by the 'we' and 'them' of lay and choir sisters, class may have seemed a more 'natural' distinction to make.

As with the majority-Irish congregation and with respect to current affairs, greater access to the media highlighted ethnic differences in the community in specific ways. When asked if she was aware of being Irish within the community at this time, Frances replied:

I did really, though it was something you wouldn't discuss. And I often felt the reporting on the TV and media was entirely biased. You *never* got the Irish side at all. We just kept quiet about it. [Frances]

Although Frances is, because of the changes of Vatican II, able to speak out, she chooses not to (or feels she cannot). Similarly, Geraldine remarked:

I was ...conscious of an anti-Irish atmosphere [when] listening to the news. My policy when anything about the north of Ireland is on the news, I don't join the community to listen to it because I don't want to hear people tut-tutting. It makes me angry and makes me say and think things that are not really me – they're just contrary to what's the general feel ...Irish people [are] dismissed as not quite up to English standards [It's] 'the Irish Celt', fighting as usual.

The prevalent attitude expressed by the media and in the congregation is different to that held by Geraldine. IRA violence is blamed on an essentialist reading of Irishness, based on age-old stereotypes of Irish inferiority and a predilection for fighting (indeed, there is a mixing of stereotypes). As Geraldine sees it, IRA violence is regarded as a product of Irishness, not the political situation. Although she wants to challenge the stereotyping, Geraldine does not feel the space exists for her to do this without being interpreted incorrectly. In trying to defend being Irish, she might be seen to be defending the activities of a group she is not in sympathy with. Her solution is to leave the room and avoid the situation entirely.

As in the pre-Vatican II period, by maintaining a sense of themselves as Irish, the women have created the space in which to hold on to two identities: both as St. Mildred sisters *and* Irish women. The latter was an identity also objectively projected unto them by English sisters, despite the attempts of de-nationalisation. As Elaine put it '*they* make you feel bad for [IRA activities]' (my emphasis). The women felt and were made to feel Irish, thus suggesting that despite policies of de-nationalisation, they were not regarded as non-Irish all of the time.

Elaine, Frances and Geraldine each qualified the statements they made by back-tracking slightly. Frances' and Elaine's comments were modified with the use of more ambiguous language (Frances: 'But I didn't feel it *very* strongly' (my emphasis); Elaine: 'we're getting a *little bit* of that' (my emphasis)). Geraldine also seemed reluctant to allow her statements to stand without further qualification ('But I don't know that I'm really aware of [anti-Irish hostility] myself ... I have never experienced ... anything that went against me because I was Irish'). It seemed that the women did not want to be seen to have strong opinions on such matters as anti-Irish hostility or admit to having personally experienced it. This could reflect a reluctance to claim a strong opinion either as women or nuns, or a reluctance to give me the impression that divisions existed within religious communities. This was certainly on Frances' mind when asked, at the conclusion of our second interview, if there was anything else she would like to add, to which she replied:

I'd just like to say about the [community] here in general. Even though ... there are all these difficulties and it isn't all that easy to be Irish ... the goal of the [community] at large is racial acceptance, racial tolerance and I think that's terrific.

One woman reacted very differently to attitudes expressed concerning IRA violence in the English congregation and her story illustrates a contrasting subjective experience of ethnicity to those explored above. During the interviews we had together, Vera had consistently drawn distinctions between herself and other Irish Catholics and refused categorisation as a 'traditional Irish Catholic'.¹⁹ On entering religious life, she had embraced a St. Mildred identity at the expense of her Irish identity in a way the other women did not ('I suppose I have become more English than the English'). When asked about how she experienced 'the troubles' within the congregation, she replied 'well, we were all shocked' and spoke of the communal attitudes towards the violence held by the congregation. Vera was firmly a part of 'we' and made no distinction between herself as Irish and others as English, as some other women had. In fact, in contrast to what sometimes occurred outside the congregation (see below), she appreciated the fact that within it she was given the space to adopt an English identity. It was the religious community that allowed Vera to transcend her Irishness and assume the ethnic identity of the congregation.²⁰ Her individual experience 'collides' (Brah, 1996) with that of the other women, contributing to the myriad of experiences in the diaspora space and illustrating how diasporas can be the sites of new beginnings as well.

In contrast to her experiences in England, Rebecca, a member of the St. Mildred congregation who had returned to live in Ireland in 1953, felt out of sorts with her co-religious in Ireland, although her response to this was similar:

I've often felt more different [in Ireland] because I'm from the north than I did in England because I was Irish ... Since 'the troubles' ... things are on the television and ... it was a bit difficult ... There was a nun who was rather Republican in the community ... For some years I used to listen to the radio [in my room]. Not come down [to the community].

As she was growing up, Rebecca's elevated class position had given her a greater sense of community with the local Protestant elite than Northern Irish Catholics. Equally, she felt a sense of belonging within the well-to-do English Catholic communities in England in which she mixed at boarding school, university and, later, religious life. Rebecca's experience illustrates the complex ways 'insiders' can be positioned as 'outsiders' in their own 'home'. Rebecca maintained an Irish identity throughout her time in England and referred to her return to Ireland as 'going home'. However, that identity was *Northern* Irish and did not sit easily with the nationalist/Republican views expressed by some others. Growing up in Northern Ireland, her class position set her apart; in the Republic, it was her 'brand' of Irishness that distinguished her. In England, by contrast, her class position meant that she was accepted into English Catholic communities.²¹

Vatican II gave the women more freedom within religious life but, in some respects, this served to emphasise ethnic divisions that already existed. Although the women experienced (or became more aware of) their ethnicity in different ways, for the most part they described ethnicity in relation to feeling a sense of belonging or exclusion: 'them' and 'us', processes of being othered or othering. The women were not removed from the social and political period in which they lived and their subjective experiences of ethnicity reflects competing discourses that existed surrounding what it meant to be Irish, English and Irish in Britain.

Changes Within Religious Life

Ethnicity has clearly created tensions within religious life for all the women of this study. Over time, however, several factors have combined to diffuse this situation. A fundamental part of this has been the opportunity for individual women to speak out to their congregations about their experiences of exclusion and marginalisation.²² Moreover, as vocations from Britain and Ireland have declined substantially, while those from the 'Third World' increased, the ethnic configuration of religious congregations has begun to change, forcing communities to face up to internal problems of racism and ethnocentrism. Two of the congregations I spoke to had actually committed themselves to issues of discrimination and racism, not only in the wider society but within their own communities. This was achieved through recognising that problems existed and actively dealing with them through workshops, facilitators and so on. It has not been easy to undo the hierarchies that have built up within religious congregations (sometimes over centuries) and it is clear from the testimonies of the women that some members of their own communities remain reluctant to change. However, attempts to dismantle internal structures have been fruitful and have directly affected the women's sense of being Irish, as their accounts illustrated.

Outside the Congregation

As the wider society began to permeate religious life, so the women who chose to avail themselves of the opportunities presented by Vatican II began to move into it to a greater degree than ever before. The women could pass more freely between the convent and the outside, and, in time, were able to take up employment independent of their congregations (although only with its consent). Some women began to move out of congregations

altogether, into residential properties with a small number of sisters or, in some cases, alone. Those women who chose to wear 'civilian' clothes were also less conspicuous as religious.

For the women of this study, entry into the wider society occurred at the same time as the renewed IRA campaign and increased anti-Irish hostility in Britain. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, the women were aware of their Irishness in the context of a society where to be Irish was to be suspect and where circulating discourses allowed for few positive interpretations of their ethnicity. The women's experiences of subjective ethnicity explored below demonstrate the othering of Irish people in Britain generally, although this occurred simultaneously with whatever processes of othering existed within the congregations themselves.

Several of the women mentioned becoming aware of their Irishness directly in relation to anti-Irish hostility and admitted feeling shameful about their ethnicity. Hannah remarked that she was 'aware of my nationality and ashamed of it!' although several of the women expressed similar sentiments. Some of the women took on prevailing attitudes concerning the collective guilt of the Irish in Britain, whereby the activities of the IRA were reduced to ethnic essentialism instead of being understood in political terms. Lilian commented 'there's a shame attached to that kind of violence ...and there's a sense of being associated with that group, you know, ...if they're Irish and you're Irish'.

As Irish, the women were racialised in a particular way. Generally, this was through a connection with violence, although negative stereotypes about 'the Irish' tended to co-

exist rather than replace one another. Bernadette alluded to this when she commented ‘bombs and alcohol, sometimes you’d be afraid to open your mouth’, suggesting two possible negative associations that might be attached to her Irish accent.

On occasion, this racialisation was experienced more directly. Lilian was asked by one of her students if she was a bomb-maker. On hearing that an Irish woman (who was also a nun) was to begin working in the same social welfare organisation, a colleague of Teresa’s moved his desk to a different office. Neither of these women made any complaint about what had happened to them which suggests an acceptance of anti-Irish comment or hostility as part of the experience of being Irish in England.

Josephine was also the victim of racist comment, not at work but in the public domain. In the early 1970s a woman standing at a bus stop, on hearing her Irish accent, drew her umbrella in the air, hit Josephine across the arm and remarked ‘bloody Irish, why don’t you go home?’. In a separate incident, Josephine was on a bus in Knightsbridge the day the IRA bombed ‘Harrods’.²³

The buses were stopped when we got to Knightsbridge and nobody knew what was going on and this [police] inspector got on our bus [and said], ‘F_____ Irish, they’re at it again’. And like that [flicks her fingers] the bus went up and everybody started saying they’d like to string up the Irish and what they wouldn’t do to them if they could get them. And I was *sick* ...I didn’t know what to do. I hopped off and I sank down onto these steps of a house ...this woman sat down beside me and she said “are you Irish?” And I looked at her. She said, “it’s alright, I am too”. She said, “what are we going to do?” and I said, “I don’t know”.

Hickman & Walter argue that anti-Irish attitudes are ‘ingrained’ in the police force which is ‘particularly serious because the[y] are in a position of authority and have the power to enforce their prejudices, including the apparently legitimate use of violence’ (1997:190).

The violent comments made by the police inspector on the bus might be seen to legitimate anti-Irish hostility. In both instances, the alleged violence of ‘the Irish’ is reversed. There is an equally violent assertion of who belongs and who is excluded from society, revealing the instability that surrounds ‘belonging’ in England for Irish people. As the woman with the umbrella reminds Josephine, England *cannot* be her home. Likewise, jumping off the bus is symbolic of her exclusion.

At the bus stop, Josephine is recognised as Irish by her accent. In the bus, she is ‘invisible’ as Irish because of her silence. This reflects the ambiguous, but none the less insecure, position of Irish people in England. As members of the ‘white’ majority, Irish people tend to be categorised as ‘within’ the dominant group. However, they also continue to be simultaneously constructed as ‘outsiders’ on the basis of ethnicity (and religion) (Walter, 2001:81-105). The experiences recounted here show the lived reality of this precarious position. Irish people might be commonly regarded as ‘belonging’ in England but membership can (and is) revoked quite suddenly. While their physical appearance may not mark them immediately as outsiders, their accent has the potential to do so.

Vera, who had successfully abandoned her Irishness within the congregation, found this was less easily achieved outside it, where others continued to categorise her as Irish. Despite her (to me) barely detectable Irish accent, she felt that she ‘stood out as an Irish woman’ and changed her work to avoid coming into contact with members of the public. The tension that existed between how Vera chose to categorise herself and how she felt

others categorised her illustrates the relationship that exists between subjective and objective identity formations.

The women of this study reacted to anti-Irish hostility in various ways: by trying to maintain some form of invisibility (silence, modifying accent and so on); or by trying to create a space in which to assert a more positive Irish identity. Kate's strategy was 'to let people know ... that you weren't of this' (i.e. supportive of the IRA) by avoiding talking about Ireland or issues related to Ireland. As we have seen, other women tried to maintain a low profile by not speaking. Teresa 'acquired' an English accent to avoid being marked out as Irish. Walter has described this strategy as 'drastic ... available only at considerable personal cost' (2001:175) although this was not how it was described to me by Teresa. Instead, I think her decision to change her accent reflects the 'common sense' attitude to anti-Irish sentiment in Britain and the acceptance of it by Irish people living there, as well as the adaptations that have to be made to fit in or be accepted.

Other women refused to hide their Irishness. Hannah, for example, made simple but bold declarations: 'I used to say "*I'm* Irish"'. Following her experience on the bus, Josephine decided it was time to 'fight back. [Those] people aren't doing these things in my name and I'm *not* ashamed to be Irish'. She began to work as a counsellor for Irish migrants and also campaigned for the release of the Birmingham Six. Later, she began to focus her counselling work more directly towards Irish women migrants. This represents a re-working of her own identity over time: first in relation to her ethnicity, later with respect to her gender. Starting in 1970, Annette devoted herself to working for Irish prisoners in British gaols. Each of these acts may be seen to represent a form of resistance by the

women: a refusal to be silenced as Irish themselves or to acquiesce in the silencing or 'active unseeing' (Buckley, 1997:97) of 'the Irish' in England.

Although religious have not traditionally been regarded as a migrant group, the women's accounts of Irishness and the strategies they employed to deal with, overcome or resist social constructions of themselves resonate very much with research by Hickman & Walter (1997) on the experiences of Irish people in Britain generally. However, although their stories contribute to the collective history of the diasporic experience of Irish people, the women did not see themselves as part of the second 'great wave' of Irish migration to Britain. When asked if they regarded themselves as 'Irish emigrants in England', the interesting and almost universal response was in the negative. Their movement was, for the most part, in the context of entering religious life and was not regarded by themselves (or their families) as 'emigration', which, for the period in which the women of this study were leaving, had negative connotations and was discursively constructed in terms of enforced exile for men (Miller, 1985) and selfish opportunism by women (Gray, 1996a; Lee, 1989, 1990).

Despite the experiences outlined above, the women of this study continued to draw distinctions between themselves and 'the Irish' in England. They rarely considered themselves to be part of an Irish migrant or ethnic community,²⁴ which they generally regarded as a group of economic migrants that were discriminated against (though Josephine and Joan believed that they were there to 'serve' this group). Two women actively excluded themselves from Irish communities they came into contact with through their work: Pauline on the basis that it was exclusively white, Josephine because it was a

‘ghetto’ of nationalist politics and exclusively male. However, Josephine did feel informally connected to other Irish women in England, of different religious and social backgrounds. Although the women occupied the same space as other Irish people in England (and some even worked directly with or for them), they did not see themselves as occupying this space entirely or exclusively. Their membership of religious congregations continued to separate them in some way from the experiences of others. What is interesting is that none of the women talked about their own religious communities as ethnic communities in themselves, though some of them clearly were. This is not to suggest, however, that they did not hold on to or express Irish identities, which will be explored in the following section.

CONCEPTUALISING IRISHNESS

Religious life in the pre- and post-Vatican II period formed an important structural focus of the two previous analytical chapters, as it has in this chapter. Although touched upon previously, the importance of migration in influencing the women’s self-identities is focused on in much greater detail here. In this section, I explore the ways in which the women define and express their Irishness and the impact of migration on the women’s sense of *ethnic self*, in England and elsewhere. Experiences of Irishness in Ireland will be explored in the following chapter.

Defining Irishness and Forms of Expression

Although most of the women in this study recognised themselves as Irish in some way, the importance they attached to this and the degree to which they emphasised it varied, as did

the ways in which they chose to display or express it. For all but two of the women still living in England (Vera and Margaret), being Irish continued to be a significant part of their identity, both as a reference to the place they came from (the past tense) as well as part of who they continued to be (the present tense). Many of the women used the term Irish to describe themselves to me. For example, Frances remarked 'I very definitely see myself as Irish', Kate, 'I'm *very* Irish!'.

When asked how important being Irish was to them, most women replied that it was second only to their identity as nuns or as women. For these women, being Irish was something natural and unquestioned – a fact of having been born and raised in Ireland – and referred to some essential truth about themselves. Annette remarked that she 'couldn't help being [Irish], that's what I *was*', while Lilian described herself as 'just Irish ...It's just how I am. It's a fact of life ...I am Irish and my parents are Irish'.

In fact (and Lilian's quote is an example of this), family was a recurrent theme when talking about Irishness. Family implies roots and, by extension, still being rooted in Ireland/Irishness: a biological, natural and, for some, unbreakable connection. Some women made no distinction between family and Irishness. For example, Catherine was 'very, very proud of my Irishness' because of the 'warmth', 'hospitality' and 'personality' this had afforded her, but equally, she believed this 'nature' to have come from her family. The family is frequently invoked as a metaphor for the nation because the emotional ties and distinctive characteristics that are associated with it are seen to parallel the relationship between the nation and its people (Gray 1998:151). The women used family, however, as a means of emphasising their Irishness.

While the family is constitutionally enshrined as the basic unit of Irish society, for Irish women religious living elsewhere it might represent an even more significant means of talking about national identity and belonging. This is because in the pre-Vatican II period religious were expected to cut familial and national ties. The opportunity to re-connect with families in Ireland for women religious in England after Vatican II was also a means of re-forming relations with Ireland.

Another important way of talking about Irishness that emerged from the women's accounts was in terms of a shared heritage and imagined community with others. Elaine talked about feeling 'still ...very attached to your own', meaning other Irish people, while Catherine remarked that she felt Irish people, wherever they were in the world were in some way connected: 'tuned in [to a] Celtic spirituality'. Although necessarily imagined, this had real consequences for Catherine: she found it easier to build up a rapport with strangers who were Irish than of other nationalities (especially English). Catherine stressed that the inter/national community of Irish people she imagined was not based on Catholicism although it was not surprising, given the close relationship between Irishness and Catholicism as they were growing up, that many women continued to make a connection between Ireland/Irish and Catholicism. For example, Elaine was 'proud' to be Irish 'because I got my faith from my Irish inheritance'. Other women talked about a shared linguistic (Hannah) and cultural (May) heritage.

The women demonstrated their Irishness in different ways. Some felt they physically embodied Irishness and could be easily recognised as such: through accent principally but

also by 'looking' Irish. For example, Catherine talked about having 'that real Irish hair'. Other forms of expression included an interest in Irish current affairs, which many of the women exercised by reading Irish newspapers and other forms of Irish media.

Elaine had loved Irish music from childhood and made taped recordings from the Irish national radio station which she listened to in England. Frances planned to incorporate her Irish identity into forthcoming celebrations to mark her fiftieth year in religious life by celebrating in both England and Ireland, with Masses in both English and Irish and by asking her family in Ireland to take an active role in the celebrations. As both Elaine and Frances were members of the St. Mildred congregation, this was a form of expression not previously available to them and revealed, in the case of Frances, how inextricable family and ethnicity was.

By contrast, some of the women who had experience of living in majority-Irish congregations did not think Irishness was something that needed to be displayed in an outward or external way. This perhaps represented a re-formulated ethnic identity distinct from the one pre-ordained by the congregation. As Lilian put it:

I am Irish [but] on St. Patrick's Day, I don't need to go out with a mound of Shamrock ... Whether I wear it or [not], I'm Irish ... but I don't have to push it down people's throats.

Annette and Josephine's work with Irish people in Britain could also be seen as an expression of their Irish identity.²⁵ Catherine's work since the mid-1990s, in a homeless shelter where the majority of users were Irish, had given rise to a greater sense within herself of being Irish in England.

One way in which the women maintained their Irishness was through actual visits to Ireland and friends and family there, the experiences of which will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Since Vatican II, opportunities to visit Ireland have increased and many of the women are able to visit Ireland annually at least (visiting family in Ireland is still the most cost-effective way of taking holidays for religious). Most of the women do return to Ireland at least once a year, others less regularly, while two choose not to return at all. Visiting Ireland should not, however, be regarded as a litmus test of Irishness: although Elaine and Bernadette do not visit Ireland, they still both consider themselves to be Irish. As Elaine put it ‘I would never feel that I was anything else *but* Irish’. Both these women felt that they were too old and frail to make the trip to Ireland (although, as noted in chapter six, Elaine had never felt entirely comfortable reneging on the promise she had made early in religious life not to return home).

By contrast, Vera and Margaret do visit Ireland, albeit irregularly, but do not privilege their Irish identity.²⁶ Margaret remarked: ‘it doesn’t matter to me if I’m Irish, English, Scottish or Welsh ...I couldn’t care less what nationality I am’. For both women, being Irish was a ‘fact’ about who they were – a statement on their passport – though neither felt it was a relevant or appropriate description of their identity. Both women came from very different backgrounds,²⁷ entered different religious congregations (one English, the other majority-Irish) and had come to distance themselves from an Irish identity at different times (Vera once she entered religious life, Margaret after a period working on the missions) but for broadly similar reasons: because Ireland was no longer a significant

place for them and because being Irish had been surpassed in importance by other forms of identity.

Vera and Margaret tended to define themselves outside ethnic/national terms, although they recognised how problematic this was. If not Irish, then what were they? Initially, Vera described herself as ‘more English than the English’ but later recanted this, replacing it with an international, ‘cosmopolitan’ identity. Margaret described her Irishness as ‘diluted, not the only thing’ and used gender as a means of claiming a supra-national/ethnic identity, as explored in chapter five. However, as will be seen, this was not without its problems. Although the women might claim an identity outside the boundaries of ethnicity or nationality, they felt positioned within these boundaries by others, and found ethnicity/nationality difficult identities to replace.

Claiming an ‘Irish-in-England’ Identity

For those women living in England, claims to an Irish identity was one that was at a geographical distance from Ireland and expressed in terms of a conscious sense of being ‘other’. Moreover, it was influenced by the specific circumstances of the relationship between Britain and Ireland and the experiences of living as an Irish woman in England, what I have called an ‘Irish-in-England’ identity.

The women talked about being ‘so’ (Catherine), ‘very’ (Kate), and ‘real[ly]’ (Annette) Irish precisely in relation to what they were not – English/British. As Lilian, echoing an earlier quote from Elaine (see above) put it, ‘I’m not anything else’ adding, ‘I mean, I

would *never* see myself as British’. Both Geraldine and Josephine talked about being ‘very conscious of being Irish’ which is more likely to be felt outside Ireland. Within Ireland, as part of the majority, ‘ethnicity’ can seem to fade, reflected in the common tendency to speak only of ethnic minorities, not ethnic majorities. Significantly, as Lilian suggests, although the form that Irishness took might change, the simple fact of being Irish was not something many of the women felt was negotiable or replaceable with another ethnicity, at least for themselves. As Annette said of being Irish: ‘I didn’t have a choice’.

Growing up in Ireland, being Irish was experienced for the most part subconsciously.²⁸ In England, however, it became something tangible. As illustrated above, Irishness was often experienced, or most obviously felt, negatively by the women, in relation to the socio-historical relationship between Britain and Ireland, anti-Irish sentiment and IRA hostilities. The Northern Ireland peace process, however, which became public in 1994 and coincided with Ireland’s competent repositioning in the 1990s as a modern, economically successful European country, has had some positive effect on the experience of being Irish in England for the women. Irene talked about it being ‘easier’ to be Irish in the post-1994 period, a sentiment echoed by many. Josephine observed that the position of Irish people in relation to other ethnic minorities had improved over time: ‘I think we’re a bit fashionable at the minute, [the] perception has changed. That we’re not a nation of “ignorant Paddies” ... We ain’t at the bottom anymore’.

However, although ‘easier’ to be Irish in England, the women’s experiences before and throughout the period known as ‘the troubles’ illustrated to them how easily acceptance by the host nation (or individuals within it) could be revoked. Moreover, residual insecurities

remained and often rose to the surface. Lilian continued to worry about how she appeared to others as an Irish person, especially in the professional arena: 'If I come up against people who are 'terribly' English and I'm obviously Irish ...there's a sense of do I fit in here? Do I belong? Am I accepted?'.

Once again, accent is key as a mode of exclusion based on ethnicity and, by implication, class. By 'terribly' Lilian was referring to people with upper-class accents who, in her estimation, were confident in their own position and questioning of hers (as the provincial of a large organisation). It is through speech that Lilian becomes 'obviously' Irish. Margaret, who did not privilege her Irish identity, found nonetheless that it 'sneaks up on me every now and then'. One example she gave was feeling 'less intelligent' than other students on a post-graduate course she was doing: 'inferior to all these clever English people'. Remarking on this, she commented on 'Irish people' (whom she called 'we') feeling 'inferior as a race'.

Whatever the shifting experiences of Irishness in Britain, the women continued to experience their Irishness in terms of being different, not being indigenous (and in certain circumstances, not being welcome). By their own admission, the women made no claims to have 'assimilated' into English society at the expense of an Irish identity. Although, as will be explored in the next chapter, many of the women found a sense of belonging in England, none of them expressed this with reference to an English, or indeed hybrid Irish-English identity. Linguistically, a traditional incompatibility between Irish and British/English exists which is not the case elsewhere: although 'Irish-American' and 'Irish-Australian' are acceptable terms, 'Irish-British' or Irish-English' is not generally

used. This was reflected in the way the women talked about being Irish as a statement of what they were not or could not be, meaning English/British. Even Vera's claim to be 'more English than the English' (later recanted) suggested a kind of hyper-identity, one that lacked authenticity.

Irishness Elsewhere

In addition to Ireland, which will be considered in the next chapter, some of the women experienced ethnicity outside England, when they travelled to live and work in the further outposts of their congregation. Pauline, Frances, Margaret, Geraldine and Joan each worked 'on the missions'.²⁹ Within the 'third world' a broader frame of reference existed in which the women were positioned as 'white Europeans', 'other' to the indigenous populations they worked with and associated with the wider Catholic/Christian missionary project (with its attendant imperialist associations). Geraldine did not like the elevated social status being white was seen to give her in Africa while Frances recalled some of the difficulties involved in running a school when 'race was always an issue'. By contrast, however, Margaret found it liberating to be outside the British-Irish binary. It was during her time in South America that she began to deconstruct her self-identity, downplaying her ethnicity and privileging her identity as a woman (see above and chapter five).

Irishness did come to the fore, however, within the mainly white European missionary communities where processes of othering continued to take place. This was more obvious to some women than others. Joan was proud of and drew inspiration from the Irish mission-foundation sisters from her congregation who had gone before her to Asia, whose

memory was ‘so, so powerful; so, so strong’ and where some still lived. However, it was clear from talking to other women in the congregation that tensions surrounded the role and position occupied by these Irish women (who were still referred to as ‘the Irish Mothers’, although the indigenous religious were known by the less ennobled title ‘sister’). Lilian recounted a conversation with one of her co-religious from the Asian community which illustrated their desire to break down what appeared to them to be a hierarchical, if not domineering, relationship between the indigenous and the Irish missionaries:

She said, ‘well, to be quite honest with you, there’s a little bit of feeling amongst some of us that we’ve had enough now, you know? We want to be ourselves. Okay, they’ve contributed and so on but, let’s move on’.

In Africa, Pauline witnessed practices of othering by Irish priests, who used their numerical supremacy, and Irish nationalist songs, to dominate social gatherings and exclude other nationalities. This was something that ‘disgusted’ and shamed Pauline, and was, she noted ‘a side of being Irish that I did not like’. In response, she withdrew from social gatherings altogether although she was privately thankful for entering into an English religious congregation which had given her the opportunity to recognise cultural superiority in others, and move beyond it herself:

We all have a culture [and] are wrapped up in the limits of our own culture. And thinking on it later, going to England and being trained there helped me to break out of that.

Discourses of Irishness constructed in the context of the colonial (and post-colonial) relationship between Britain and Ireland were being reproduced and replayed outside that archipelago, within the wider remit of the Irish diaspora. Once again, Brah’s theory of ‘diaspora space’ is useful. Rather than one fixed ‘minority’ posited against another fixed

‘majority’, Brah’s concept allows for several different diasporas in intersecting relationships with one another, relationships which may be – though are not necessarily – mediated through the ‘indigenous group’ (Brah 1996:209). In the ‘diaspora space’ of the missions, Irish men and women used notions of a religious-ethnic superiority developed in response to colonialism ‘at home’ to further their own imperial missionary projects abroad and as the basis to exclude other missionary groups who shared that space.

CONCLUSION

Although not immune to processes of post-colonial identity formation that pertained in the society in which they were born and grew up, the women of this study chose to enter congregations that, for the most part, required them to spend at least some time outside Ireland, usually in England. By exploring their experiences of ethnicity within religious life, this chapter has highlighted ethnicity as a major factor in the subjective (and objective) identity formations produced by and for the women of this study. It has shown that, contrary to the stated aims of the pre-Vatican II regime, ethnicity remained significant within religious life and that the women were involved in processes of being other or othering based on ethnicity depending on their choice of congregation, in which Irishness was either celebrated or repressed. While their stories of life within the congregation revealed experiences specific to it, their accounts ‘outside’ resonated strongly with those of other Irish migrants, especially in the post-Vatican II period, since which time they have been able to move and mix with the wider society to a much greater extent. However, the impact of Vatican II within religious life has, more recently at least,

allowed for the women to make a more liberal and individual claim upon ethnic identity than was the case previously.

In the final section of this chapter the impact of migration upon the women's sense of self as Irish was explored both in England and elsewhere. The specificity of the relationship between Ireland and England and the specific experiences of living as Irish women in England has affected how the women see themselves as Irish and contributed to the development of an 'Irish-in-England' identity. However, historical constructions of Irishness in relation to England also affected women on the missions. As was the case before, the structure of this chapter reflects the importance of entering religious life and Vatican II on the women's sense of identity, although migration was also introduced as a major theme. In the next chapter, migration will be focused upon once again in relation not only to ethnic but religious and gendered identity.

¹ Walter argues that 'the identity of Englishness has colonised Britishness' (2001:94).

² The exception was Bernadette for whom living in England was not a requirement but always a possibility.

³ Only two did so as professed nuns. Ten left Ireland to enter congregations in England while five left after a short period (between six months and two years) in religious life in Ireland. The remaining four (Frances, Elaine, Kate and Rebecca) had lived in England before entering religious life: Frances and Rebecca to attend school, Elaine and Kate in search of work. The women experienced their ethnicity in new ways in England. For Frances, Elaine and Kate, a sense of belonging and national community was replaced by a recognition of themselves as 'different'. Elaine immersed herself in an Irish Catholic community and would always refer to members of this community as 'us', her English colleagues at work as 'them'. Kate and Frances formed communal ties with others based on Catholicism rather than ethnicity. Kate was aware of anti-Irish sentiment in England but was not 'personally' affected by it as she had plans to enter religious life and did not, therefore, consider herself to be part of the wider Irish migration to Britain. Frances' strategy to fit in, was to adopt a Lancashire accent (which she later 'lost'). Rebecca, on the other hand, felt more 'at home' in England. Her experience will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

⁴ Although similar comments were made by several of the women.

⁵ Each of the four majority Irish congregations were described to me as 'Irish'. Only two examples are given here. Although no exact figures were available to explore, the women's testimonies suggested that while the majority of vocations were from Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales were also represented. There were, in some communities, a 'smattering' of French sisters and individual sisters from elsewhere.

⁶ The majority-Irish congregations that the women of this study were members of were probably not all 'Irish' to the same degree – that is, did not give an equal space for an Irish identity to be expressed and probably expressed different forms of Irishness (I get the impression that the St. Marie congregation was the 'most' Irish) but the accounts the women give of convent life in the pre-Vatican II period suggest that an Irish 'culture' (in whatever form it existed) did predominate in these institutions.

⁷ There was no space for the women to express a personal ethnicity based, for example, on their particular regional or family background.

⁸ Scottish, Welsh and even French seemed to exist somewhere in between Ireland and Britain on the continuum.

⁹ I am talking about occupying dominant/dominated positions simultaneously, not based on alternative/varying dimensions of differentiation but the *same* dimensions i.e. ethnicity, religion (and even class).

¹⁰ As well as class lines. Many congregations maintained formal distinctions between 'choir' and 'lay' sisters at least until the 1950s. Even where formal distinctions did not exist, congregations could operate less official distinctions.

¹¹ I refer to Zygmunt Bauman's use of 'in-group' and 'out-group' here (1990:41-4)

¹² Thus highlighting how particular the 'Irishness' of religious congregations was in fact.

¹³ In her research on English congregations between 1840 and 1910, Susan O'Brien noted that Irish accents were problematic in English congregations: 'although all English congregations readily accepted Irish born sisters as lay sisters, the brogue was not always felt to be suitable in a choir nun' (O'Brien 1990:455). She does not specify if this was the case in majority-Irish congregations. None of the women who were members of majority-Irish congregations mentioned elocution lessons to me, but that is not to say they definitely did not occur. However, if they did, they might not have been interpreted in the same way.

¹⁴ Some of these notes were made before I found out about the elocution lessons. I could not detect an Irish accent from Rebecca, Vera or May. In fact, when I met Vera (the first of the St. Mildred women I interviewed) I wondered if she had misunderstood what my research project was about because I was not sure that I was talking to an Irish woman at all – a sign of how much I associate accent with being Irish or, more specifically, the way that a middle-class English accent was incompatible with my own notion of being Irish. If she had spoken with a strong Liverpool accent, I probably would have presumed that she was second-generation Irish, still 'Irish' in my books.

¹⁵ Hannah was confident in her Irishness to the point of believing that she was 'doing God a favour' by coming to Britain. Given the rule of obedience that existed within congregations, it is difficult to imagine many women taking the stand Hannah did.

¹⁶ It was not until the mid-1980s that a provincial was elected who had been educated at one of the St. Mildred state schools. At the time of the interview, the provincial of St. Mildred's was Irish

¹⁷ This inheres with what Mary Hickman has written about Catholic schools in Britain downplaying their Irishness as part of a project of de-nationalisation of Irish/Irish descent students (Hickman, 1995)

¹⁸ The kind of Irishness being celebrated could be exclusive of Irish women too. Sarah called it 'pseudo-Irish' because it represented not the Ireland she had recently left, but a nostalgic re-remembering of an Ireland past.

¹⁹ She did this by highlighting that she was from the middle-classes, that she was not educated by religious and that her family were not as religiously devotional as other Irish Catholics (whom her father considered 'vulgar').

²⁰ Later on, Vera would cease to privilege ethnicity at all, favouring an identity as a professional woman instead.

²¹ Illustrating once again the confusion over Irishness as a distinct racial/ethnic grouping, one that can be transcended somewhat through class.

²² This was mentioned by women in the St. Cecile, St. Marie, St. Louise and St. Mildred congregations.

²³ In December 1983, an IRA car bomb exploded outside Harrods in London, killing six and injuring ninety others (Coogan, 1987: 647).

²⁴ Only Catherine and Geraldine regarded themselves as part of an Irish community in England. Catherine did so because she worked predominantly with Irish people, although it was only recently that she had begun to think of herself in this way. Geraldine qualified her allegiance by noting that contemporary Irish communities tended to revolve around pubs and alcohol, which did not interest her.

²⁵ Annette did not feel she had a choice in undertaking the work she did – rather, she felt 'called' to do it as an Irish Christian. Josephine also felt compelled to work with other Irish people. Although Margaret worked with Irish women, her only interest was in working with women. The fact that they were Irish was incidental.

²⁶ However, I do not feel comfortable suggesting that they were in some way *not* Irish, as some of their comments might be taken to suggest as their interviews proposed a more complex relationship with Ireland/Irishness. Simply put, *not* being Irish was not a position they could easily or always inhabit.

²⁷ Vera was a middle-class Catholic from the West of Ireland who drew a distinction between herself and ‘traditional’ Irish Catholics. Margaret was a Catholic from the Northern Irish county of Derry whose Catholic identity had been important to her as a child.

²⁸ Although this was not the case for Margaret growing up as an Irish Catholic in Derry.

²⁹ Pauline, Frances and Geraldine left England to work in Africa for twenty, twenty-one and four years, leaving in 1956, 1966 and 1989 respectively; Margaret worked in South America for a total of five years between 1976 and 1982; Joan worked in Asia between 1993 and 1995. In addition, May and Vera had lived in France for three and sixteen years respectively, mostly in the pre-Vatican II period. However, as members of the St. Mildred congregation they were regarded as ‘English’ sisters and were neither more conscious of their Irishness in France or able to identify any way their sense of Irishness was altered by being there.

Chapter 8: MIGRATION, 'HOME' AND 'BELONGING'

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter, while it followed a similar format to chapters five and six, introduced migration as a major theme affecting the women of this study's sense of Irish/ethnic self. This chapter continues the focus on migration by examining what the women's narratives revealed about 'home' and 'belonging' in the context not only of ethnicity, but religious and gendered identities also. In contrast to the last chapter, which concentrated on the women's accounts of Irishness in England (and elsewhere), the first section of this chapter examines the women's experiences of Irishness in Ireland, highlighting the contradistinction that exists between being aware of Irishness in England on the one hand, and unconsciously Irish ('at home') in Ireland on the other. However, the women's experiences of religious life and womanhood in Ireland, which are looked at in the second section, challenge any uncomplicated corollary between Ireland and home/belonging, and suggest alternative loci where the women feel 'at home'.

In the three preceding chapters, individual 'variables' of identity were explored separately. This allowed sufficient space to be given to examine the women's sense of themselves as women, religious and Irish over time (an important aim of this research) and to show that each identity was itself a site of contestation and negotiation. This was not to suggest, however, that the women could be regarded exclusively as gendered, religious or Irish, or that their sense of themselves as women, for example, could be entirely separated from their sense of themselves as nuns or Irish. Indeed, reference was made in these chapters to

the difficulty of examining identities independently of each other. In this chapter, more space is given to exploring synthesis and interconnections between ethnic, religious and gendered identity, specifically through the women's position as migrants. 'Home' and 'belonging' are major themes in migration literature generally, as well as that specific to Irish migration. By exploring the different ways the women conceive of home and belonging, this chapter seeks to explore the complexity of identity and the negotiation and contestation that occurs *between* variables, as much as within them. It also serves to situate the women's accounts within the broader subject of Irish migration/diaspora studies.

IDENTITY, CONTESTATION AND NEGOTIATION

Experiences of Being Irish in Ireland and Notions of 'Home'

All of the women of this study made short or extended visits to Ireland while some have returned to live there permanently.¹ What was this experience like for them? The last chapter explored the ways in which the women described 'feeling' Irish in England, physically and psychologically. Significantly, this was in contrast to how it was experienced in Ireland. Talking about returning to Ireland Geraldine remarked that she found it 'freeing. I was more comfortable, more at home, belonging to everyone else around'. Lilian also used the phrase 'freeing', adding:

When I step off the plane or the boat, I always feel a sense of 'I'm home' ...that thing, what it['s] like to be Irish in England, it's just lifted, it's gone. So I must carry that, you know? When I'm in Ireland, I belong ...It's something around identity. There's a part of me that I don't have to excuse or feel ashamed of.

Interestingly, these women used very similar language to describe (quite vividly, I felt) the immediate change or release that accompanied their experience of being Irish in Ireland. No longer 'marked' by their Irishness, sameness could be assumed. The related concepts of home and belonging were recurrent in these and other accounts. In fact, all the women of this study referred to Ireland as 'home' in some way – a 'common parlance', as Josephine put it, for Irish people living in England. Perhaps this suggests her own belief that Irish people in England could not be exclusively at home there, or that being Irish in England necessarily gave them a home elsewhere.

For the majority of those who did return, a sense of being 'at home' was also invoked (as Geraldine's quote suggests). 'At home' suggests familiarity and feeling at ease, a compatibility with one's surroundings that being foreign can potentially preclude. For many of the women, birthplace and family were central to notions of 'home' and feeling 'at home'. Often, when referring to Ireland as home, the women would move from the general to the particular, as Catherine did when she said: 'Home is Ireland and home is my own home, where I was born [and] my family ... because I would consider them "home"'.

By contrast, Vera and Margaret, did not feel 'at home' in Ireland. Both felt they had grown apart from Ireland: Margaret from her family, Vera from the place itself. Recounting her visits there, Vera positioned herself as a tourist, everything was unfamiliar to her.² Margaret continued to visit family in Ireland because she felt she 'should' but was 'bored stiff' when there and got 'very angry at the way they speak and their attitudes and their values and I just think, I've got nothing in common with them anymore'. As a result, neither woman felt their Irishness to be important to them.

Those who had returned to Ireland to live confirmed a sense of belonging, at least in terms of Irishness. Again, family was an important element although not the only one. Eileen was 'delighted to come home [and be] in close contact with my family'. Sarah, the only woman in this study to privilege her Irish identity above all others, was 'delighted' to be close to her family again, although, in fact, she lived at the opposite end of the country to them. When she talked about being 'closer' to them, she meant sharing the same national space – and media. The fact that certain 'big' events in Ireland might be ignored or interpreted differently in England had reinforced her feeling of being away from home. Although still geographically separated from her family, she felt psychologically closer to them in Ireland. More than this, however, she was glad to be back to her 'own people' (her phrase). She felt a greater sense of 'ease' in Ireland where she did not have to 'translate' (as she put it) not only phrases but her way of thinking. For Sarah, it was not only accent that separated 'Irish' from 'English' but also speech patterns, humour and modes of interpretation – as though a different logic operated in each place.

Only one of the women mentioned any difficulty being accepted as Irish on her return to Ireland, whether temporarily or permanently. Teresa had adopted an English accent to 'fit in' in England but this was not found to be acceptable when she moved back to Ireland where she was 'insulted' by colleagues at work for being 'a snob'. On the basis of her changed accent, Teresa's authenticity as Irish was being questioned. Intimated in the insults, however, was the suggestion that Teresa's attempts of 'ethnic fade' were a strategy of upward social mobility, which implied her complicity in positioning Irish/Irishness as

inferior in relation to English/Englishness. However, within a short time, Teresa regained her Irish accent and, since then, had found no difficulty being accepted as Irish.

Being Perceived as Irish

Indeed, accent may have been a significant element in the women's overall experiences of feeling 'at home' in Ireland. As noted in this chapter and the last, accent is often regarded as a fundamental part of Irish identity and the majority of the women I spoke to had not 'lost' their Irish accents. For some, this may have been the result of living with other Irish women in majority-Irish communities. In addition, as Josephine suggested, religious in majority-Irish communities were under less pressure to change their accents than Irish people in England generally. Of those in the St. Mildred congregation who, to my mind, spoke with an upper-class English inflection, only Vera actively positioned herself as a 'foreigner' in Ireland. Neither Rebecca nor May, who had both returned to Ireland to live, mentioned their Irishness being questioned there.³ It is impossible for me to guess if these women spoke as they did before leaving Ireland or if their Irish accent had been 'lost' in England. That their Irishness was not challenged by their accent may be down to class. When class is introduced into the equation the clear distinction between 'Irish' and 'English' ways of speaking the English language becomes more fuzzy. In the context of a firmly middle-class congregation in a well-to-do suburb of Dublin, Rebecca's and May's accent might be regarded as nothing more than an indication of their elevated class position. Alternatively, it may have been because they were religious.

Indeed, the fact that the women of this study were religious might have fortified their Irishness – at least in terms of how they were perceived in Ireland itself. If England continued to be associated with Protestantism or secularism, these women's status as Catholic sisters might be regarded as confirmation of their Irishness, or of an Irishness not yet 'tainted'. Of relevance, too, was the women's situation in England and the fact that they did not create families of their own there. The 'roots' they put down were necessarily more fluid than in the traditional sense of family and kin and their relationship to Ireland/Irishness might be seen to be more concrete than that of other migrants who might have 'non-Irish' children or partners 'over there' in England 'challenging' their Irishness. This was a significant factor in the women's experiences of returning to Ireland, where they tended to be re-positioned within the family they had left behind as daughters, nieces, sisters, aunts – especially so when they reverted to their baptismal name.

As these accounts show, most of the women in this study continued to regard Ireland as 'home' and felt a sense of belonging and 'at homeness' there, where ethnicity ceased to be an issue for them. Moreover, in fact, for women religious in England, Ireland (and more specifically birthplace and family), may take on greater significance as 'home' because of the ambulant lifestyles many of them lead, especially given the changing organisational structure of religious life since Vatican II. With the exception of Elaine, who worked in the same hospital ward for forty years before (reluctantly) taking retirement, the women of this study moved between five and fifteen times, across counties, countries and continents. Their living arrangements also changed in each new location – living with smaller or larger communities of different women. When they were not moving, those around them often were. In a material sense, there was no permanence in the homes they set up. As

members of community, they owned things in common, including, very often, the houses they lived in and their furnishings, and when they moved they took only their personal possessions with them.⁴

Family was an important element in feeling at home in Ireland, but not the only one: shared accent, humour and other factors also helped. The experiences of being Irish in Ireland revealed that ties to Ireland/Irishness and journeys 'home' were both physical and psychological travails. However, as will be explored in the next section, ethnicity was not the only mode through which the women experienced Ireland and when looked at from a different perspective, feelings of belonging and 'at homeness' were contested, thus revealing a more complex interpretation of 'home' and belonging and one that was not tied exclusively to ethnicity.

Contested Belongings and Alternative Notions of 'Home'

Although a significant mode of belonging, ethnicity has no monopoly over it. Most of the women of this study felt their sense of belonging in Ireland was contested through their investments in gendered and religious identities which they felt were incompatible with the ways they were positioned as women religious in Ireland.

At least until the 1980s, the women recognised, especially on visits back to Ireland, that the status of religious was higher in Ireland than in England. For example, Catherine compared the different reactions she received as a religious collecting money for her congregation in England and in Ireland. In England, she was expected to explain her

mission in great detail and the public were quite reticent about giving her money, whereas 'before you come to the door in Ireland, they'd be coming out with the money to you'. Several of the women commented on their not being expected to pay for public transport or refreshments in Ireland, often relating stories of specific journeys from Ireland to England which reflected the contrasting experiences of travelling in each country – as well as a sense of 'knowing they had arrived' based on how they were treated by others. Neither in Ireland nor England were religious regarded as 'ordinary' people but they were elevated members of society in Ireland in a way that they were not in England, where the women felt that they were considered eccentric and, sometimes, viewed with suspicion.

Over time, however, this has changed. In England, especially as they have become less recognisable, less suspicion surrounds religious. Never having carried the significance it did in Ireland, being a religious has simply become less relevant. Also, the position of religious 'other' has been taken over by non-Christian religions such as Islam. In Ireland, by contrast, while membership of religious congregations continues to be significant, the meaning of religious life has changed. As noted previously, the status religious life affords an individual (and her family) has receded in Ireland since the 1970s. Increasingly, and especially in the closing decade of the twentieth century, religious have come to represent a history of Catholic dominance, oppression even, that modern Ireland is trying to move beyond, nuns themselves a form of passive womanhood considered outdated and archaic. Perhaps the most serious factor affecting the way religious are regarded in Ireland has been the eruption since the 1990s of allegations against religious of physical and sexual abuse. At the same time, however, more traditional Catholics in

Ireland seem reluctant to accept the modernisation of religious life that has occurred in the wake of Vatican II.

For these reasons, it is difficult to identify ‘the’ position of religious in Irish society. Clearly, certain elements of Irish society want to reject any notion of ‘Catholic Ireland’ and see religious as representative of this, while others cling to a more traditional conception of what religious life should be and how religious should behave. In addition, and unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of anger against the perceived abuse of power by religious from almost all sectors of Irish society.

Most of the women in this study mentioned the changing attitudes towards religious in Ireland and England. Referring to Ireland, Irene explained that ‘things are totally different now’ while Josephine felt that the pendulum had ‘swung completely the other way’. In England, on the other hand, as Lilian put it, ‘I don’t think people give a damn [that you’re a religious]’. Although the meaning attached to religious life has changed in Ireland, it had not ceased to be significant. Returning to Bourdieu’s notion of capital, religious life continues to be a *form* of social/cultural capital in Ireland – it is invested with meaning – although this is no longer easily convertible into *symbolic* capital. The various, sometimes conflicting, notions of religious as representative of some kind of ‘traditional’ Catholic Ireland, as passive, irrelevant and possibly abusive, have meant that being a nun in Ireland continues to be significant in a way it is not in England. For many of the women, this translated into a form of social and psychological ‘baggage’ that had to be carried in Ireland: ‘that *weight* on top of you’, as Josephine described it (her emphasis).

For those who were physically recognisable as religious, returning to Ireland was made particularly difficult by this change in attitude. While none of the women said they missed the status religious once had in Ireland (indeed, some were retrospectively critical of the power of the Catholic Church and religious in Ireland), many found it difficult to come to terms with what they perceived to be a show of animosity towards them, and were irritated by the tendency for all religious to be seen as one homogeneous, power-abusing group. Kate and Hannah described Irish society as 'anti-religious', Kate later suggesting religious were 'under siege' there. Irene believed that her habit now effected less courtesy from members of the public than would previously have been the case. Likewise, Hannah felt rebuffed in Ireland because she was recognisably a religious, something she did not feel happened in England:

[In Ireland] they'd ignore you. You might as well ...be invisible ...Whereas here somebody will speak to you. They might be a Shi'ite or something but if you say good morning, they'll answer you. In Ireland they just went by as if [you] were dead ...I think there's a very definite swing against religious.

Catherine had returned to Ireland to work for a period in the 1970s and found working there harder than in England: 'they wanted the pound of flesh more'. She had heard similar sentiments from her co-religious more recently. Religious in Ireland were considered to be 'different' to other members of society and super-human expectations were placed on them as a result, both by themselves and others.⁵ Given the allegations of abuse, however, religious are now seen to have reneged on their side of the arrangement and consequently to 'owe' Irish society a great debt. As a result, and based on past experience, Catherine felt that Irish society would be less appreciative of her work than would be the case in England.

Those women who were less ‘traditional’ in either work, dress or outlook felt under pressure in Ireland to conform to particular notions of religious life. Although, generally speaking, younger generations tended not to mind, particular elements of ‘Catholic Ireland’ continued to hold on to a fixed view of ‘proper’ religious which was challenged by the ways the women chose to live their lives, something they were vocally reminded of on visits to Ireland. Several of the women⁶ gave specific examples of being ‘told off’ for choosing not to wear a habit. More significant than the fact of being told off was the manner in which it was delivered, suggesting that they were displaying the petulance of a wayward child and presuming that secular Catholics in Ireland had the ‘right’ to tell the women how to dress. There were expectations too about how they should behave. Margaret recalled the difficulty of a family wedding which she was expected to attend, in her habit, but not join in with the celebrations by dancing or drinking because that would cause scandal: ‘They wanted you there but, you know, doing what they wanted you to do and looking the way they wanted you to look’.

Significantly, a number of these women⁷ described their experiences in terms of ‘propriety’ – feeling ‘owned’ by certain elements of society, specifically ‘the real traditional Catholics’ (Margaret):

It was like they owned us ...and they could dictate what we would wear, what time we went to bed, what time we got up, what we should do with our lives [and] were quite miffed that we decided to do things [differently]. [Margaret]

Although Vatican II changed the organisation of religious life within the congregation, in Ireland authority continued to be levied on it from outside. The relationship between religious and Irish society was actually quite complex; even the elevated position religious

once held had needed to be authenticated by the society they served and could be challenged or revoked by it. Although not 'equal', a reciprocal relationship existed between the two:

They *owned* you. Okay, you ran the schools and hospitals and everything else but you were *owned* ...and you had to meet people's expectations [and] fulfil [their ideals].
[Josephine]

This was why religious were, as Geraldine put it 'public property'. By not fulfilling the expectations of others, the women's authenticity was challenged and they were made to feel that they were not 'proper' religious (which reflected the way some more traditional religious regard 'modern' nuns).

The general belief that Irish society was less accommodating of the modernisation that had taken place in religious life as a result of Vatican II was echoed by some of the women who had returned there to live. This was most notably the case for Norah, who had moved back to Ireland only a couple of months before we met after spending almost sixty years in England. Although glad to be near her family, Norah was finding it difficult to adjust to the expectations she felt were placed upon her, not only in society but within religious life itself. The community in Ireland had not modernised to the same extent as it had in England. Having lived under a system of shared leadership for over twenty years, Norah found she was expected to be somewhat deferential to her 'superior' in Ireland. Indeed, a general consensus among the women was that modernisation of religious life was easier in England because of the very different role and position of religious in that society.

Especially problematic for those women who had embraced modernisation in the wake of Vatican II was the determining effect being a religious in Ireland had on legitimate expressions of their gendered identity. Religious life in the pre-Vatican II period was designed precisely to ‘form’ the women in particular gendered ways, and this was reflected in the notions of ‘proper’ religious that the women encountered in contemporary Ireland. The restrictions that were imposed upon their behaviour in Ireland were interpreted by them specifically as a constraint on their gendered identity. As Josephine put it, ‘In Ireland ...you’re a nun first ...*Then* you’re a woman – if you graduate to that level, of which you’re not at all certain!’.

As explored in chapter five, being regarded primarily or exclusively as a religious limited the women’s freedom to claim a gendered subjectivity of their own – as feminists, sexual beings or ‘ordinary women’. Such limits tended to be experienced more acutely in Ireland because of the continued significance of religious life there and the varied, often conflicting, meanings attached to it. Echoing Josephine, Margaret said ‘in Ireland, you’re very much seen as “the nun”’. Explaining the practical implications of this, Lilian said:

We just can’t win in Ireland ...if I’m in Ireland and I go around just as myself and I sit around in jeans or I express opinions about women and women’s rights and what I feel about patriarchy [I am not accepted].

If ‘marked’ by their Irishness in Britain, the women were equally, if not more, ‘marked’ by their status as religious in Ireland.

In chapter six, I explored the women’s attitude to identifying themselves as religious and revealed that six of the women chose to conceal their identity as religious. Two of these

women (Sarah and Teresa) lived in Ireland and, significantly, it was only upon moving back there that they had begun to conceal their identity as religious. Sarah did so because she felt that she would not be accepted as a 'normal' woman, Teresa because religious were considered 'out of touch' but also because she feared being associated with abuse. In fact, Teresa believed that her status as a religious was having a direct and negative effect on her chances of finding employment in Ireland.

Being regarded only as a religious – however that might be interpreted – was an attempt to deny the women the opportunity to claim a subjectivity of their own and to impose one upon them instead. Moreover, the particular meanings applied to religious life tended to fix the women in a functionalist relationship with society – owned by/owing society, they are seen as objects 'of' that society, a resource for it, not equal members within it.

Since the 1970s, the women's movement in Ireland has significantly altered the position of women (Connolly, 1996, 2002), often by challenging or, at least, confronting 'traditional'/'Catholic' notions of womanhood (Berry, 1988; Mahon, 1987). However, the movement itself, its aims and achievements, are not often seen to be relevant to or have meaning for women religious (MacCurtain, 1974). Exploring concepts of womanhood in Ireland in the late twentieth century, Pat O'Connor (1998) suggests that traditional dominant constructions of womanhood tended to fix women in functionalist relationships with society as wives, mothers and daughters but that, reflecting achievements made by the women's movement, a newer discourse has begun to emerge, one of 'personhood'. This recognises women's subjectivity as workers, feminists and so on, while taking into account also the importance of family and other relationships through which the self is

defined in Irish society. Religious life is not a subjectivity that O'Connor explores but it seems clear from my respondent's experiences in Ireland that this new discourse is not one openly available to them.

Attitudes towards returning to Ireland permanently especially served to illustrate that ethnicity had no monopoly over 'belonging'. Return is an important theme in migration literature and diasporic studies, although generally the 'homeland' referred to is imagined, the return mythic (Anwar, 1979; Brah, 1996, Buijs, 1993; Clifford, 1994). Studies of first-generation Irish women in Britain, however, reveal a more immediate and material engagement with the possibility of return (Gray, 2000b:179), generally associated with younger women, and, most especially, those without children. Over time and as partner and/or familial roots are put down, the possibility of return becomes less realistic.

The women of this study constitute a very distinct group of Irish women migrants living in England, since the possibility of their choosing to return to Ireland has actually increased over time. Before Vatican II, the women would have had no say in where they lived. Since then, however, many of them have more influence, although not complete freedom, concerning where they reside and work. This is especially the case after retirement. In addition, the number of religious in Ireland has been in decline since the early 1970s and there is no longer a sense of there being 'too many' nuns in Ireland, something a number of the women commented on when discussing their attraction to entering religious life elsewhere. Significantly, the fact that religious are celibate, and given their more fluid living arrangements, the practical difficulties of moving between the two countries are not so great as might be the case for women with partners or children/grandchildren in

England. Moreover, all the congregations I spoke to had communities in Ireland, which meant that the women had institutional links with Ireland and, more pragmatically, a place to live there.

Despite this, however, at the time the interviews took place only one woman living in England – Annette – was sure that she wanted to return to Ireland permanently. Although few of the other women had or could have ruled this out, it was certainly not an ambition for any of them. Annette often positioned Ireland/Irish and England/English in oppositional terms: the Irish were ‘warm’, the English ‘cold’; Ireland was ‘religious’, England ‘pagan’. For her, Ireland was home so it followed that England could not be. The rest of the women, however, had a more complex and less fixed notion of where home was and where they felt they belonged. For the most part, this related to the changed and changing meanings attached to religious life in Ireland and in England over the course of their lives as religious.⁸

For example, Vera suggested she would find life in Ireland ‘too restricting’, Margaret that the ‘narrowness of outlook’ would prevent others from understanding her ‘way of looking [at] and living life’, while Josephine did not think she could ‘take the intrusion’. A very different binary was being set up between Ireland and England than was suggested earlier whereby England now became the more accepting nation. Lilian thought it would be ‘too difficult to be a religious in Ireland now’ to consider returning permanently, while Hannah was not the only one to state simply that it was ‘easier’ to be a religious in England. In contrast to her experiences as a religious in Ireland, Lilian felt she could ‘be myself a lot

more [in England]'. This was echoed by Josephine, describing the relationship between herself, the religious she shared a house with and their secular neighbours:

They all know we're religious [but] they don't make any presumptions or expectations [about us]. You can come and go and do what you like [In England] they meet you, you're a woman, they deal with you.

As these accounts show, the women contrasted the problem of being accepted as a religious in Ireland with their experiences in England as religious/women. Hannah described England as a friendlier and more accepting place than Ireland. Lilian loved to 'be lost in London' – a place where no one belonged but, by extension, no one was excluded. Several of the women talked about their community as the place they could really 'be myself' (Geraldine) and 'feel at home' (Catherine). Indeed, with the exception of Annette, for all of the women living in England where they lived was 'home' also – and, significantly, a place where they felt 'at home'. As Kate put it: 'Ireland is home but I'm 'at home' in England'.

One further complexity could be identified. When describing where they lived as 'home', the women rarely mentioned England. Instead, they talked about 'here' or 'this house', meaning a more specific regional location or the community in which they lived (where most interviews took place). Perhaps in an abstract way, 'England' remained Ireland's opposite and was more difficult to identify as home than the actual surroundings of everyday life in which the women felt at home.

For those women who continued to visit Ireland, see themselves as Irish and consider Ireland as 'home', belonging there was made difficult by their experiences as religious

women – though, in this respect, where they lived in England represented home, belonging and acceptance. It is interesting that the women used very similar language to describe their feelings of being ‘other’ as Irish in England as they did their experiences of being religious in Ireland: Lilian ‘carried’ her Irishness with her in England, Josephine felt a ‘weight’ on top of her as a religious in Ireland. This suggests that different identities or subject positions can be physically or psychologically demanding to inhabit, depending on space, place and context. Although less marked by their Irishness in Ireland, they had to deal with other forms of being othered – as religious and women.

Avtar Brah (1996) recognises the importance of ‘multiple’ homes in the migrant identity but the women of this study rarely identified more than one home at once. However, Ireland as ‘home’ was arrived at through a very different route than England as ‘home’ was. Initially, ‘home’ was assumed to refer to ethnicity, only later was this unpacked in terms of religious or gendered identity. Certainly, Ireland was where most of them felt at home in terms of ethnicity, but this was not the only medium through which they experienced feeling ‘at home’. Regarding the freedoms to live their life as religious and, significantly, as women, where they lived in England was also home. Indeed, for some, the significance of their home in England took precedence over that in Ireland.

However, recognising ‘here’ as the primary home was not a position easily arrived at. Few of the women seemed comfortable admitting to me at least, another Irish woman in England whose plans to stay/return they could not know, that they had no ambitions to return. It seemed like the ‘wrong’ answer. For example, Kate initially went very quiet and would speak only very hesitantly about not wanting to return (until I told her this was

‘okay’) while Margaret thought it an ‘*awful*’ thing to admit. Gray (1996a, 1997a, 1997b) has identified the various and limiting acceptable discourses surrounding ‘emigration’ in Ireland. She found, for example, that, because Ireland was assumed to be ‘the best place on earth’, migration out of it had to be legitimated by economic necessity or to pursue economic success (1997a:167, 1997b:213-216). Moreover, she found that in addition, out-migration for women was deemed especially ‘unnatural’ given the role women play in reproducing children/the nation (1996a:172, 1997b:210-11). Despite their being religious and, therefore, not in the business of reproduction, the women’s narratives revealed a similar reluctance or discomfort surrounding their desire to remain migrants. This reinforces Gray’s point about the limitations of ‘emigration’ discourses and underlines the way Irish women still tend to be constructed in terms of their reproductive capacities, their sexuality and their ‘duty’ to the nation, leaving little alternative space to claim a woman-centred Irish subjectivity.

Recognising that more than one place could be home was not easy either because it was arrived at through identifying processes of being othered. Directly after remarking that in England she felt accepted as a woman, Josephine added the caveat ‘you might be an *Irish* woman’, which revealed that how she felt she was positioned in England was affected, complicated even, by the fact that she was Irish. Similarly Lilian, after describing Ireland as a place she belonged, added ‘whether it rejects me as being religious ...I mean, there’s all that’.

The position the women of this study occupied in Ireland was complicated by their status as religious, which directly affected their freedom to claim the gendered subjectivity they

wanted to – whether that be the more ‘traditional’ form of religious life which had at one time been esteemed in Irish society, or a more personal and individual notion of womanhood not prescribed by membership of a religious congregation. Conversely, in England, their sense of belonging and perceived positioning by others was affected by their being Irish. In each place, albeit in different ways, their sense of self was refracted through their positioning as women, religious and Irish. This positioning could be experienced unconsciously or as ‘baggage’, depending on the situation.

Diasporic Identities?

Both Gray (1996a, 1997a, 1997b, 2000b) and Walter (2001) have drawn on diaspora as a tool to explore Irish women in England’s multi-located sense of belonging. In recognising both the point of origin, as well as the point of destination, diaspora enables us to think of migrants both in relation to where they are from and where they are now living at the same time – combining the separate locations of origin and settlement into a ‘third space’ (Walter 2001:8). In their accounts, the women of this study certainly revealed similar narratives of belonging and unbelonging, placement and displacement as those Walter and Gray collected, suggesting that diaspora is a useful concept with which to explore their sense of self. However, though malleable, diaspora is associated primarily with movement, migration and ethnicity. While conceptually it has proved useful to explore in isolation the women’s sense of themselves as Irish, this does not reveal the complex processes by which migrant or ethnic identities are formed in relation to other identities. As the accounts revealed here illustrate, the women’s sense of themselves as Irish women was influenced directly by their experiences as Irish religious women both in Ireland and

England, over time and in the context of how they are positioned by others. Diasporic is a useful description of their ethnicity but we need to remember these complex processes so that identity is not seen from one perspective only.

When identities are considered in synthesis, as in this chapter, it becomes clear that 'home' and 'belonging' are not just attached to ethnicity and geographical roots alone, but are inextricably bound to other forms of identity. One of the recurrent themes when talking about home and belonging revealed in the women's accounts was an attempt to identify a geographical, but also psychological, place/space in which to 'be yourself'. Indeed, this was a phrase many of the women used. The fact that 'being yourself', however, occurred in different places and at different times reflects the complexity and activity of self-identity, the intractability of different variables of identity, and the difficulty, even impossibility, of locating 'the' or 'one' self.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has revealed, 'home' and 'belonging' are complex and contested notions for the women of this study. Their accounts of visiting/living in Ireland showed that most of them felt a sense of belonging and 'at homeness' there, an unconscious sense of their own ethnicity which contrasted with their experiences of being marked out as Irish in England. However, their experiences of returning to Ireland as religious and as women challenged this binary and suggested a very different one instead, which positioned England – more specifically 'here' – as the place in which many felt 'at home'.

This chapter has worked ‘backwards’ to the thesis as a whole – focusing on ethnic, religious and then gendered identities. In contrast to the preceding chapters, it has examined the interrelationship of these identities. It has introduced some new material from the women’s accounts but also re-visited themes developed in previous chapters. Exploring the interconnections between identities and the intricate, if not resolved (or resolvable), ways in which the women negotiate their sense of self with respect to their perceived positioning by others, and by examining their claims for a subjective identity as Irish, religious and women, this chapter has suggested the interdependence of ‘variables’ of identity. Although the concept of diaspora has been used by others to explore Irish women in England’s multi-located sense of home and belonging, it is suggested that this risks obscuring the processes by which other identities – religious and gendered for the women of this study – might inform a sense of ‘at homeness’. Hinted at in previous chapters, it is in this one especially that migration has been shown to be an important influencing factor for the gendered and religious identities of the women of this study – although, crucially, not the only one. Rather, migration and notions of home and belonging have been used to illustrate the complex ways in which the women of this study articulate a sense of self – as Irish, women and religious.

¹ Eight women who had returned to live in Ireland were interviewed. I hesitate to use the term ‘permanently’ as women in religious life tend to move location frequently, even after they have ‘officially’ retired. Of those living in Ireland to whom I spoke, only three had ruled out leaving Ireland again for any extended period of time.

² However, Vera gave very clear reasons why she did not want to return which suggested she ‘knew’ Ireland in some way after all: ‘I wouldn’t go back to Ireland ...I would find life too restricting. The fact that everybody knows everybody else ...Here, you can be anonymous ...you can mind your own business and people don’t interfere with you. There is still that mentality [in Ireland], there is’. The feeling I got throughout the interviews was that Vera did not want to be implicated in any notion of ‘traditional Irish Catholic’ and part of distancing herself from this category was giving the impression that she was a ‘stranger’ to and in Ireland.

³ As noted in chapter 7, Rebecca felt on occasion that her ‘brand’ of Irishness was different to other women in the congregation.

⁴ Before Vatican II, the women would not even have had personal possessions.

⁵ Indeed, the position they held in Ireland was bestowed upon them at least partly because of the work they did (and was fundamental to their being accepted by society in the eighteenth-century).

⁶ Josephine, Lilian, Norah, Geraldine, Margaret, Sarah, Teresa and Frances.

⁷ Specifically Geraldine, Josephine, Lilian and Margaret

⁸ The possible exceptions to this were Elaine and Bernadette who, both old and frail women, did not often leave their communities. For these women, although they referred to Ireland as 'home', their sense of being 'at home' in their communities was uncomplicated and they never mentioned to me the shifting meanings of religious life or any effect this had had on their lives.

Chapter 9: CONCLUSION

When making contact with religious for this research and explaining its purpose to them, the most common response I encountered was incredulity: why did I want to know about the lives of religious, and how had someone – especially of my age – ever become interested in such a topic? It was a reaction that seemed to affirm the near acceptance, even by religious themselves, that they occupy a space outside what is deemed vital, relevant, or worthy of study, especially with respect to Irish women and the Irish diaspora. Yet, however, images of nuns are often used to represent or refer to Ireland, Irishness and Irish womanhood.

This curious status of religious as icon more than person was invoked at the beginning of this thesis and it seems appropriate to return to it now to ask, by way of conclusion, what might be said when the focus shifts not just to include but to centre on the experiences of Irish women religious migrants. The aim here, rather than synthesise the chapters that have preceded it, is to bring together the overall findings of the thesis, make both specific and general comments from them and point out where and how they engage with or respond to the existing literature.

The women of this study formed their sense of themselves as women in response to several factors. These included dominant though fluctuating notions of Irish womanhood, marriage and motherhood, femininity and religious life – a process of negotiation that occurred not in one moment but was on-going throughout their lives. An exploration of

the women's experiences of girlhood and early adulthood revealed their awareness of the gendered structures that pertained in the Irish society in which they were born and grew up. They recognised the limitations placed upon them as girls/women and were able to identify the particular roles they were expected to assume in response. Significantly, nuns embodied a lifestyle – religious life – that represented an attractive alternative to marriage and motherhood. As the meanings they attached to religious life clearly showed, the women had very strong ideas about what it would offer them. These ideas went far beyond warding off spinsterhood, one of the common assumptions made about Irish women's entry to religious life (MacCurtain 1995, 1997). The ways the women differentiated between congregations and individual religious revealed them to be discriminating in their decision-making processes and showed that they did not see religious as an homogeneous group. Indeed, the women did not see religious life as offering one fixed path or monolithic identity, but saw in it the potential of several different life trajectories, dependent upon the work, location or 'spirit' of a given congregation, as well as the individual personality they themselves brought to religious life.

Though some drew upon discourses of self-sacrifice, each of the women presented their entry into religious life as an act of personal agency, a sign of their taking some control over their lives. In so doing, they laid claim to an individuality and a freedom from family or other obligations that challenges previous representations of religious as mere cultural dupes, responding passively to the needs of a patriarchal Church. In addition, putting agency to the fore raises questions about what their migration meant. Sharon Lambert (2001) has argued that the Irish women migrants she interviewed in Lancaster, who left

Ireland at roughly the same time as the women of this study, did so not to pursue individual aspirations but because their movement benefited their family as a unit. In contrast, for the women of this study religious life and its concomitant migration was more of an individual act, a communication between themselves and the divine, one that the family might benefit from but rarely felt able to stand in the way of. Indeed, by choosing to enter congregations which required them to spend time outside Ireland, the women were able to articulate a positive desire for travel and migration which discourses of 'emigration' rarely allowed for. Moreover, their movement out of Ireland was not seen to threaten their Irishness or, more specifically, Irish womanhood. This makes nuns who lived outside Ireland a very specific group of migrants; their experience of migration might also be said to contradict the conventional narrative of Irish women's out-migration during this period, namely selfish opportunism, cultural abandonment or the road to ruin.

The process by which the women became nuns within religious life was entirely gendered: entrants were expected to embrace and inhabit a particular form of womanhood which was rooted in notions of woman's inferior mental capacity and dangerous physical capabilities. Although religious life is often associated with the forsaking of womanhood, an examination of the pre-Vatican II regime revealed that, in fact, religious life continually marked its members out as women. The key distinction, however, was that it denied them any investment in femininity. Religious life was never about 'shedding' gender or becoming 'half-women' (Clear, 1987b:xviii) but reinforcing gender, in very particular ways. Although some of the women retrospectively identified the regime as restrictive in terms of the gendered identity it imposed upon them, at the time they had accepted it. This illustrated their strong sense of obedience to religious life, if not their investment in

the way it defined womanhood. However, it should not be forgotten that the society the women left in order to enter religious life also regulated womanhood and had very specific notions about what was deemed appropriate female activity and behaviour.

Changes introduced as a result of Vatican II gave those women who chose to accept it the opportunity to claim forms of womanhood not previously available. The women expressed this in various ways, for example, by reverting to their secular name; in the clothes they wore; in the titles they preferred to use (or not to use); and through forming group identities with other non-religious women. A significant feature for some was a re-investment in femininity and physical appearance. Others also adopted a feminist and sexual identity which would have been refused them prior to Vatican II. However, the freedom to assert such identities was not absolute. A number of the women felt their 'right' to be the kind of woman they wanted was contested, sometimes denied, by others – among them other religious, members of the public (especially other women) and certain elements of Irish society. Although not 'fixed' in any sense beforehand, Vatican II has certainly provided space for more contestation and negotiation to occur around gender and what it means to the women to be female religious.

A focus on religious identity revealed that it too has been a site of negotiation and reconfiguration for the women – especially regarding the 'organic' nature of their Catholicism. Although as girls the women experienced their Catholicism as 'natural' and 'innate', in reality it was more constructed and more learned than they suggested. Catholicism was also, for most of the women, intrinsically linked to nationhood, Irishness and the family. Their accounts indicated that both mothers and fathers took on distinct but

important roles in passing religion on to their children, which challenges the assumption that mothers were more 'religious' figures than fathers. Certain duties were associated with motherhood in this respect, including organising children for prayer. In contrast, fathers were presented as being imbued with an ethereal spirituality superior to the mere attending of tasks, which produced a dichotomy between the roles assumed by fathers and mothers. The 'otherworldliness' of the women's vocation for religious life tended to be situated closer to the spirituality of their fathers, while the obligations of motherhood were presented as onerous and less attractive – another reason, perhaps, to eschew motherhood and pursue the superior life of the spiritual instead.

While also gendered, religious life defined religious identity. Entry into it required that the women reconfigure their religious identity, concepts of 'family' and 'nation' as a means of defining their Catholicism being replaced by religious life itself. More so than was the case regarding the forms of womanhood available in the pre-Vatican II period, the women recognised the religious regime as restrictive in retrospect – both physically and psychologically demanding – but one they chose to remain within. However, they were also able to identify the rewards of religious life, not only the opportunity to pursue educational or employment ambitions, but the spiritual rewards of a life in community devoted to prayer. Although obedience was a key part of the regime, this is not to say the women's agency ceased to exist. Indeed, their accounts of resistance, however small, revealed an attempted renegotiation of the prescribed religious identity that the pre-Vatican II regime tried to impose.

The subjective understandings and expressions of religious identity by and amongst women religious is an under explored area of research, especially so with respect to Vatican II. In this thesis, Vatican II was shown to have had a major impact on all of the women and was itself a lens through which to understand their lives. In its wake, the women's subjective identity as religious has been configured once more. For most of the women in this study, Vatican II enabled a more positive re-evaluation of what it meant to be a nun, one that was defined as much by the self as the institution of religious life. For others, however, who clung to rules and regulations as a fundamental part of religious life, Vatican II represented a challenge to the essence of religious life that was not easily accepted or understood. The women's accounts indicated that tensions continue to surround Vatican II and its consequences within religious life.

Some of the women have chosen to reclaim family, home and Ireland in a redefinition of their religious identity. Others have re-located their religion outside the formal institutions of the Church. Yet others have clung to those very structures. Vatican II has demanded an on-going and as yet unresolved re-think about what it means to be a religious and how that identity should be inhabited and displayed (not, perhaps, the intention of its authors). In the course of this redefinition, religious identity has become less easy to locate than was the case either under the pre-Vatican II regime, or in the mis-remembered intrinsic and organic Catholicism of the women's youth. That religious life has been in such flux since Vatican II also challenges the notion of it, and religious themselves, as stagnant or fixed.

Most of the women in this study did not distinguish between Catholicism and Irishness as they were growing up – although some refused to be labelled or were unable to call

themselves 'traditional Irish Catholics'. This mixing of ethnic and religious identities suggests that the women were influenced by the post-colonial Irish identity that was promoted in the newly independent state in which they grew up or by their parents' rejection of it. Most of the women had a very strong sense of the alien 'other' – especially non-Catholics in Ireland and elsewhere – while some occupied this position themselves as Catholics in Northern Ireland. However, the association between Catholicism and Ireland or Irishness did not prevent, and indeed sometimes provoked, the women to enter religious congregations that took them outside Ireland. Traditional constructions of Irish national identity have idealised women's 'natural' place in the home and 'at home' in Ireland. However, loyalty to vocation and personal choices made about particular congregations by the women of this study overrode that to family and nation. In fact, the close tie between Catholicism and Irishness enabled the women to leave Ireland without being branded 'emigrants', with the attendant negative associations.

Contrary to the stated aims of the pre-Vatican II regime, ethnicity was shown to be of great significance within religious life. The experiences of the women in this study were affected by their choice of congregation, whereby the processes of becoming a nun involved either embracing a specific Irish identity defined by the congregation or coping with the attempts of the congregation to nullify the existence of such an identity. The 'Irishness' of their congregation proved to be a support to those women in majority-Irish congregations and enabled them to subvert their position as members of an ethnic minority in England. Moreover, some were able to retrospectively identify the processes of 'othering' based on ethnicity that had occurred as a result. With the exception of one woman, who found that religious life liberated her from an Irish identity, the women in the

English congregation recalled being 'othered' on the basis of being Irish – an identity they had to repress but which few eliminated. At the time, they were aware of the processes of Anglicisation that they were being subjected to. However, the 'power over' (as opposed to 'power to') which resided with the Irish sisters in those congregations in which they were a majority was not so consciously felt at the time. The enduring significance of ethnicity within religious life highlighted the degree to which congregations were social institutions which were influenced by all too common notions of cultural or ethnic superiority.

The post-Vatican II regime has more recently enabled congregations to confront internal practices of exclusion, although initially at least greater freedoms within religious life served only to enforce ethnic divisions. Another significant consequence of Vatican II was that the women were able to move more into the wider community. However, this coincided with increased feelings of hostility towards Irish people in Britain and, as a result, the women experienced their *Irishness* negatively. One point highlighted was that even though the Northern Irish peace process and Ireland's recent economic success had made the position of Irish people in England easier, the women continued to feel conscious of their Irishness and could not be said to have assimilated into English society. This awareness of being 'other' to the majority in quite particular ways suggested a specifically 'Irish in England' identity for the women. Thereby, it illustrates the importance of migration in the women's construction of ethnic identity, even though they tended not to define themselves as Irish 'emigrants' in the traditional sense of the term. This awareness also illustrated the importance of ethnicity for Irish women in a very general sense, in their day-to-day lives in England. In terms of the extent to which

Vatican II gave the women freedom either to maintain, re-configure or re-claim an Irish identity, religious life might now be said to be less restrictive of ethnicity than is the case with other identities. However, the experience of being Irish elsewhere illustrates that ethnicity is still constructed and negotiated by the women viz. a viz. the wider population, if not those within religious life. Though some women used religious life as a supra-identity which enabled them to understate their ethnicity, the fact that they lived their lives not exclusively within community meant they could not jettison ethnicity entirely.

Through an exploration of home and belonging, the accounts revealed that the women articulated differing notions of belonging along different axes. On the basis of ethnicity, most felt 'at home' in Ireland, where their ethnicity ceased to be so consciously felt as it was in England. However, this was not the only mode of belonging and many of the women felt more 'at home' and more freedom to be themselves as religious – and as women – in England than in Ireland, where they felt certain expectations and limitations placed upon them. Although the women's narratives suggested a 'multilocalized' sense of belonging, this did not amount to an unlimited or open-ended sense of belonging 'everywhere' but pointed, instead, to contestation around where and in what circumstances the women felt at home. While it has been drawn upon by others to explain Irish women in England's sense of multilocality, I have argued that diaspora as a concept, while useful, fails to take account of the importance of identities other than ethnicity and, therefore, the more complex and interdependent ways in which identities are experienced, formed and expressed. Looking at identities simultaneously brought the main ideas of this thesis together and illustrated the ways in which 'identity' can only mean 'identities'. These different identities, which are lived simultaneously, are influenced both individually and in

combination by past experiences, present circumstances and the ways in which individuals feel positioned by others.

Much of the research on Irish women in England focuses on women in partnerships or marriages, who have had or plan one day to have children. Indeed, the family is an important motif in constructions of Irish national identity and notions of Irish womanhood. For both these reasons, explorations of Irish women's sense of belonging in England, their sense of feeling 'rooted' there and their attitudes to returning to Ireland tend to revolve around the families they have created in England or family obligations to those back home. As this research shows, however, feelings of belonging or putting down roots for Irish women are not exclusive to creating families in England and there are other ways to explore why some Irish women might feel more at home in England than in Ireland. In addition, much of the literature on Irish women in England tends to prioritise ethnic identity, exploring gender or other forms of identity only in the context of Irishness. Taking a broader approach, this thesis has explored the significance of identities beyond their relationship to ethnicity. It has shown, for example, that the women of this study formulate a sense of gendered self in England not only in relation to Irishness but also to various other factors, including religious life and femininity.

Since the late 1960s, the number of Irish women entering religious congregations has been in steep decline – more so than has been the case for men entering the priesthood. The whole profile of women religious in Ireland and England has been altered utterly since the period when the women of this study were entering religious life: there are far fewer women entering religious life and the average age of those in religious life is far older.

This has affected the overall make-up of religious in Ireland and in the institutions traditionally associated with it, including schools and hospitals.

Moreover, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland has begun to be questioned and certainly in the last decade, the Church has lost the position it once held. Simultaneously, the position of women in Ireland has also altered. Many of the limitations that had been placed upon women have been lifted and new opportunities are now available to them. It is unlikely that the Catholic Church will regain its status in Ireland. Moreover, the opportunities to pursue a spiritual life outside religious life are greater for women now than was the case in the period when the women of this study chose to enter. While its duration cannot be predicted, the economic success that Ireland has enjoyed over the last decade has also impacted upon Irish migration – altering the balance in Ireland from out- to in-migration. Issues of ‘Irishness’ are now being debated within Ireland, while reports of discrimination and racism against new immigrant groups illustrate the difficult transition the country is under-going.

In effect, the story of Irish migration is changing, such that the women of this study represent the end of an era – the end of the ‘near phenomenon’ that was Irish women’s entry into religious life in the first six decades of the twentieth century, and the departure of many of them out of Ireland. This puts greater stress on the importance of documenting their experiences now, in an attempt to make the record a little less crooked, if setting it straight is impossible. As professed sisters of the Catholic Church, these women represent a distinct group of Irish migrant women – not only for who they are, but also for who they are not: not wives or mothers or economically vulnerable. Their specific experiences of

religious life have been emphasised here – from making the decision to enter, through entry, the pre-Vatican II regime and its aftermath. At the same time, however, their experiences have relevance to the wider study of Irish migration. To return to a point made several times in this thesis, these women were not born nuns, but became them. Their accounts of growing up and making decisions about their future, which encompassed both entry into religious life and leaving Ireland, are stories about Irish society, Irish womanhood and Irish migration. Not in the pre-Vatican II period, but most especially since, were these women ever exclusively nuns. Though some of their experiences were specific to religious life, many of them involved a confrontation with issues of ethnicity and gender that have relevance beyond their status as religious. Their accounts are unique, giving an insight into a group of women previously disregarded, but they also serve to highlight something that extends beyond religious life – the inextricable, interdependent and conditional nature of identity formation.

As outlined at the beginning of this thesis, one of the stated aims of this research, and the principal reason oral history was chosen as its method, was to let the voices of Irish women religious be heard, voices generally silent in accounts of Irish women in the diaspora. In light of that, I had thought that the most appropriate way of drawing the thesis to a final conclusion would be to use a quote from one of the respondents that epitomised what it has been about. However, poring over the many pages of interviews, taken from almost fifty hours of tape, I realised that this would prove a more difficult task than I imagined. The reality was that from the complex lives of twenty-one women there could be no such final encapsulation. But perhaps that, instead, was the point, reiterating

once more the complexity and range of experiences amongst a group of women thus far disregarded, of which this thesis represents not the final word but a first step in exploring.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Pre-Interview Notes and Questions

Irish Religious Women's Migration to Britain

Pre-questionnaire Notes

Background

- Name
- Congregation (including location and size)
- Where in Ireland are you from?(rural/urban)
- What size family do you come from?(youngest/oldest/how many sons/daughters)

Vocation

- When did you decide you wanted to become a nun?
- How did your family/peers/local community react?
- Did any of your family members belong to religious organisation at that time? If so, who / when / where? Have any joined subsequently?
- How/why did you decide upon this congregation?
- What qualifications, if any, were required to enter?
- What qualifications did you have before you joined?

Leaving Ireland

- When did you leave Ireland and for what reason? (employment / to enter religious life / as a sister already)
- Had you ever been outside of Ireland / to England before?
- What year did you arrive in England? (pre/post Vat II?)
- How did you travel and with whom?
- Did you have any friends or relatives living in England at the time?
- How did you feel leaving Ireland? What were your first impressions of England?

In the Congregation

- Were there any other Irish sisters in the congregation when you arrived?
- Do you think that affected your experience in any way?
- How did you get on with other Irish sisters / non-Irish sisters?
- Were there many English/other sisters in the congregation?

- Were there any divisions or groupings within the congregation, for example, by rank (choir/lay), class or nationality?
- What significant difference, if any, did you notice between living in Ireland and living in England? (re: the practice of Catholicism; the strength of the Catholic Church; the role of religious in society; your position in society).
- Were you aware of being Irish, or an Irish Catholic, in England?

Work

- What were your main duties when you first arrived and how have they changed?
- What training did you receive in religious life?
- Were you aware of your nationality within the work place?
- Has your nationality or any other identity influenced the kind of work that you do now?

Irish community

- Were you ever aware of an 'Irish community' in England? If so, how would you define it?
- Did you consider yourself to be part of 'the'/'an' Irish community? Do you think Irish religious in England have a particular role within the/an Irish community?

Assimilation

- It has been argued that because most Irish people living in England are white and English-speaking, that they have 'assimilated' into English society. What would you say to this?
- Do you think you have assimilated?
- How important is your Irishness to you, if at all? If so, why and in what ways?
- In terms of your identity, which of the following terms would you privilege/shy away from using in defining yourself: Irish, religious, woman? What other terms would you use?

Time scale and Changes

- Since moving to England, great changes have taken place in Ireland, in England and in the relationship between Ireland and England (for example, Irish emigration to England / return migration, IRA campaign / peace process, status of religious / decline in status of religious in Ireland). What do you think the most important (positive and negative) changes have been and why?
- How has the position of Irish emigrants changed in England?

- How important is Catholicism and the Catholic Church, do you think, to/for Irish emigrants? Do you think its position has changed?
- What are your thoughts on a) the number of Irish women who entered religious congregations until the late nineteen-sixties? b) the decline in the number of Irish women entering religious congregations since then?
- What has been the impact (positive/negative) of Vatican II? How has it impacted upon your life? Have you or your congregation adapted in response to it? In what ways?

Appendix 2: Letter to Religious Congregations

The following is an example of the letter sent to religious congregations requesting help with my research:

Yvonne McKenna
15 Peacock Street
Kennington
London
SE17 3LF
Tel/Fax: 0171 7357667
19th January 1998

Dear [X],

I am a doctoral student at the University of Warwick conducting research on Irish religious womens' movement to England in the twentieth century. Although Irish Catholic sisters are an integral part of the history of Irish women, research on Irish women's lives in England has failed to take into account their experiences. I hope to remedy this in my work, and there are two areas with which you could help me. Firstly, I am attempting to gather statistical information regarding Irish nuns in convents in England. In addition to this archival research I am hoping, by interviewing Irish nuns, to explore their experiences of moving to and living and working in England, as Irish religious women.

I should stress that my research is not on the Catholic Church as an institution but on the lives of Irish Catholic sisters themselves and their specific experiences in England within the wider context of Irish migration. I would be grateful of any assistance you could provide by granting access to convent archives or enabling me to meet Irish nuns in your convent, with a view to including their experiences in my study.

If you have any queries or would like to discuss my project in further detail, please contact me at the above address or through the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender at the University of Warwick (Coventry, CV4 7AL), where my work is supervised by Dr. Maria Luddy and Dr. Caroline Wright. I can supply references at any time.

Yours sincerely,

Yvonne McKenna

Note: In addition to the statistical analysis of religious/Irish religious in England over the period 1930s-1990s (which proved impossible to undertake), I had initially hoped to consult the archives of the congregations I spoke to so that I might gather accurate figures of the composition of Irish and non-Irish sisters within the congregation over the period under review. As I was not granted access to all of the convent archives, the material I did gather in this respect proved unusable and, as a result, the references to the composition of Irish/non-Irish sisters given in this thesis are from personal communications with the respondents.

Appendix 3: Information about Congregations

Congregation	Place/date of formation	‘Charism’ ¹	Lay/choir distinction?
Sisters of St. Mildred	England, 1840s	Education of Catholic girls.	Yes, since removed.
Sisters of St. Louise	France, 1820s	Education of Catholic girls.	Yes, since removed.
Sisters of St. Nadine	France, 1820s	Nursing.	No.
Sisters of St. Cecile	France, 1850s*	To look after old women and men and young children.	No.
Sisters of St. Marie	France, 1820s	Teaching, nursing, visiting poor, missionary work, looking after orphans.	Yes, since removed.

* Originally, this congregation was set up as a branch of a French congregation although it became independent a few years after the formation sisters arrived in England in 1851.

Cont.

Congregation	Composition of Irish women in congregation in England at time of respondents entry ²
Sisters of St. Mildred	One third Irish
Sisters of St. Louise	Majority-Irish
Sisters of St. Nadine	Majority-Irish
Sisters of St. Cecile	Majority-Irish
Sisters of St. Marie	Majority-Irish

¹ The ‘charism’ is the work active congregations are set up to do. Since Vatican II, the work of religious congregations and individuals within them has expanded.

² From personal communication with respondents.

Appendix 4: Information about Respondents.

Respondent	Congregation	Age*	Background†	Family size	Age entering religious life	Age leaving Ireland	Reason / status leaving Ireland
Josephine	St. Marie	49	Rural	6 siblings	20	22	As a rel. novice
Lilian	St. Marie	51*	Unsure	5 siblings	18	20	As a rel. novice
Geraldine	St. Mildred	53	Rural	5 siblings	19	19	To enter rel. life
Sarah	St. Louise	54	Rural	3 siblings**	17	17	To enter rel. life
Teresa	St. Marie	54	Rural	1 sibling**	17	17	To enter rel. life
Margaret	St. Marie	56*	Rural	8 siblings	18	19	As a rel. novice
Catherine	St. Cecile	57	Rural	3 siblings	18	18	To enter rel. life
Irene	St. Cecile	59	Rural	1 sibling	17	17	To enter rel. life
Kate	St. Louise	63	Rural	1 sibling	27	19	Employment
Hannah	St. Mildred	65	Rural	1 sibling	18	18	To enter rel. life
Joan	St. Marie	66*	Rural	2 siblings**	18	18	To enter rel. life
Vera	St. Mildred	67	Rural (m-c)	8 siblings	24	24	To enter rel. life
Eileen	St. Mildred	67	Urban	‘large’	20	20	To enter rel. life
Frances	St. Mildred	68	Rural	10 siblings	18	10	Schooling
Pauline	St. Mildred	68	Urban	1 sibling	17	18	As a rel. novice
Elaine	St. Mildred	76	Rural	5 siblings	23	19	Employment
Norah	St. Marie	77	Rural	7 siblings*	19	19	To enter rel. life
May	St. Mildred	79	Urban (m-c)	Unsure	18	18	To enter rel. life
Annette	St. Louise	79	Rural (m-c)	1 sibling	19	37	As a religious
Rebecca	St. Mildred	81	Rural (m-c)	1 sibling	21	13	Schooling
Bernadette	St. Nadine	86	Rural	7 siblings	19	31	As a religious

* = estimate ** = at least

* Age at first interview

† m-c = middle-class. Given the conditions of the predominantly rural Irish society in which the women grew up (see chapter four), it is difficult to assign to them a class background. I have listed ‘middle-class’ here either because it was how the women described themselves or as I deduced from their accounts. The remaining women might not, in the context of the society in which they lived, judged themselves to be necessarily working class’, however, nor could they be considered ‘middle-class’ as the term is generally understood.

Cont.

Respondent	Education / qualification[‡]	Living place[§]	Number of interviews conducted
Josephine	Degree, PG (post-entry)	England	2
Lilian	Degree, teaching qualification (post-entry)	England	2
Geraldine	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	England	2
Sarah	Degree, teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Teresa	Degree (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Margaret	Degree, PG (post-entry)	England	2
Catherine	Nursing, PG (post-entry)	England	3
Irene	Cookery course (post-entry)	England	2
Kate	Teaching qualification (pre-entry)	England	3
Hannah	Degree, teaching qualification (post-entry)	England	2
Joan	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Vera	Third-level qualification (pre-entry); teaching qualification, PG (post entry)	England	2
Eileen	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Frances	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	England	2
Pauline	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Elaine	Nursing (pre-entry)	England	2
Norah	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
May	Teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Annette	Teaching, PG (post-entry)	England	2
Rebecca	Degree (pre-entry); teaching qualification (post-entry)	Ireland	1
Bernadette	Nursing (post-entry)	England	2

[‡] PG = Post-graduate degree/qualification.

[§] At time of interviews.

Appendix 5: Primary Female Occupations and Areas of Work (according to the 1926 and 1961 census of Ireland).

Year	Total FGE*	Agriculture	Dom. Service	Shop Service	Industry	White Collar†	Professions‡
1926	343,894	121,957 (35 %)	87,553 (25.4%)	17,382 (5%)	32,601 (9.4%)	17,679 (5.1%)	29,505 (8.5%)
1961	286,579	42,111 (14.6%)	39,971 (13.9%)	24,670 (8.6%)	43,496 (15.1%)	48,442 (16.9%)	41,176 (14.3%)

(Source: Clear, 2000:14-15)

Appendix 6: Number and Percentage of Women ‘Engaged in Home Duties’ (according to the 1926 and 1961 census of Ireland).

Year	Number	% of all adult females§
1926	550,147	48.8%
1961	601,392	60.0%

(Source: Clear, 2000:15)

* FGE = Females Gainfully Employed.
† Including secretaries, post-office workers and telephonists.
‡ Including religious.
§ Adult females = 12+ in 1926, 14+ in 1961.

Appendix 7: Population of Ireland, 1841-1991 (in 000's)

Year	32-counties	26-counties
1841	8,175	6,529
1851	6,552	5,112
1861	5,799	4,402
1871	5,412	4,053
1881	5,175	3,870
1891	4,705	3,469
1901	4,459	3,222
1911	4,390	3,140
1926	4,229	2,972
1936	4,248	2,968
1946		2,955
1951	4,332	2,961
1961		2,818
1971		2,978
1981		3,443
1991		3,515

(Sources: The Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems, Reports, 1956; The Economic and Social Implications of Emigration, NESCS Report, 1991).

Appendix 8: Numbers of Irish-born in Britain, and Irish-born and Republic of Ireland-born (ROI) in England and Wales, 1841-1991.

	Ir. born In Brit.	Ir. born in Eng & Wales	ROI born in Eng & Wales*
1841	415,725	289,404	
1851	727,326	519,959	
1861	805,717	601,634	
1871	774,310	566,540	
1881	781,119	562,374	
1891	553,122	458,315	
1901	631,629	426,565	
1911	550,040	375,325	
1921	523,767	364,747	
1931	505,385	381,089	303676 (54%)
1951	716,028	627,021	470266 (51%)
1961	950,978	711,047	644398 (51%)
1971	952,760	891,670	615820 (52%)
1981	850,387	789,426	606851 (53%)
1991	836,934	788,283	592550 (54%)

(Sources: Census material 1951; 1961;1971;1981;1991. Jackson, 1963:11; Walter, 1991:12; NESCS Report, 1991.)

* Female percentage of total ROI born in England and Wales in brackets.

Appendix 9: Out-migration from Ireland, 1871-1990

	Annual averages	Females	Males	Female percentage of total
1871-1881	50,175	25,214	24,958	50.25%
1881-1891	9,7332	30,476	29,257	51.03%
1891-1901	39,642	19327	20,315	48.74%
1901-11	26,154	14,390	11,764	55.02%
1911-26*	27,002	13,068	13,934	48.40%
1926-36	16,675	9,420	7,255	56.48%
1936-46	18,711	7,453	11,258	39.83%
1946-51	24,384	14,075	10,309	57.72%
1951-61	40,877	19,091	21,786	46.70%
1961-71	13,451	7,215	6,236	53.64%
1971-81	-10,389	4,583	5,806	44.10%
1981-86	14,377	6,094	8,283	42.40%
1986-90	33,700			

Sources:

The Economic and Social Implications of Emigration, NESc Report, 1991;
Commission of Emigration and other Population Problems, Report, 1956;

* From 26 counties after 1922

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